

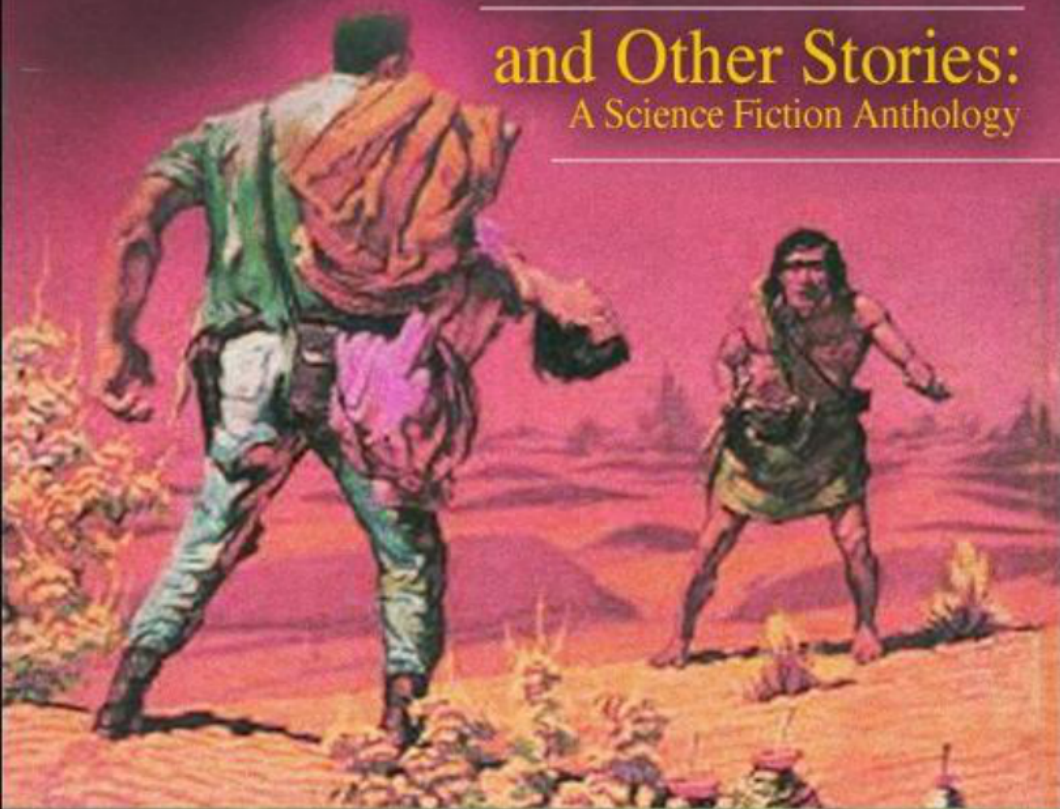
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Planet of the DAMNED

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A Science Fiction Anthology



by Harry Harrison

SF Anthology

by

Harry Harrison

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The Repairman

Illustrated by Kramer

Being an interstellar trouble shooter wouldn't be so bad ... if I could shoot the trouble!

Transcriber's Note:

This etext was produced from *Galaxy* February 1958. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.

The Old Man had that look of intense glee on his face that meant someone was in for a very rough time. Since we were alone, it took no great feat of intelligence to figure it would be me. I talked first, bold attack being the best defense and so forth.

"I quit. Don't bother telling me what dirty job you have cooked up, because I have already quit and you do not want to reveal company secrets to me."

The grin was even wider now and he actually chortled as he thumbed a button on his console. A thick legal document slid out of the delivery slot onto his desk.

"This is your contract," he said. "It tells how and when you will work. A steel-and-vanadium-bound contract that you couldn't crack with a molecular disruptor."

I leaned out quickly, grabbed it and threw it into the air with a single motion. Before it could fall, I had my Solar out and, with a wide-angle shot, burned the contract to ashes.

The Old Man pressed the button again and another contract slid out on his

desk. If possible, the smile was still wider now.

“I should have said a *duplicate* of your contract—like this one here.” He made a quick note on his secretary plate. “I have deducted 13 credits from your salary for the cost of the duplicate—as well as a 100-credit fine for firing a Solar inside a building.”

I slumped, defeated, waiting for the blow to land. The Old Man fondled my contract.

“According to this document, you can’t quit. Ever. Therefore I have a little job I know you’ll enjoy. Repair job. The Centauri beacon has shut down. It’s a Mark III beacon....”

“*What* kind of beacon?” I asked him. I have repaired hyperspace beacons from one arm of the Galaxy to the other and was sure I had worked on every type or model made. But I had never heard of this kind.

“Mark III,” the Old Man repeated, practically chortling. “I never heard of it either until Records dug up the specs. They found them buried in the back of their oldest warehouse. This was the earliest type of beacon ever built—by Earth, no less. Considering its location on one of the Proxima Centauri planets, it might very well be the first beacon.”

I looked at the blueprints he handed me and felt my eyes glaze with horror. “It’s a monstrosity! It looks more like a distillery than a beacon—must be at least a few hundred meters high. I’m a repairman, not an archeologist. This pile of junk is over 2000 years old. Just forget about it and build a new one.”

The Old Man leaned over his desk, breathing into my face. “It would take a year to install a new beacon—besides being too expensive—and this relic is on one of the main routes. We have ships making fifteen-light-year detours now.”

He leaned back, wiped his hands on his handkerchief and gave me Lecture Forty-four on Company Duty and My Troubles.

“This department is officially called Maintenance and Repair, when it really should be called trouble-shooting. Hyperspace beacons are made to last forever—or damn close to it. When one of them breaks down, it is *never* an accident, and repairing the thing is never a matter of just plugging in a new part.”

He was telling *me*—the guy who did the job while he sat back on his fat paycheck in an air-conditioned office.

He rambled on. “How I wish that were all it took! I would have a fleet of parts ships and junior mechanics to install them. But its not like that at all. I have a fleet of expensive ships that are equipped to do almost anything—manned by a bunch of irresponsibles like *you*.”

I nodded moodily at his pointing finger.

“How I wish I could fire you all! Combination space-jockeys, mechanics, engineers, soldiers, con-men and anything else it takes to do the repairs. I have to browbeat, bribe, blackmail and bulldoze you thugs into doing a simple job. If you think you’re fed up, just think how I feel. But the ships must go

through! The beacons must operate!”

I recognized this deathless line as the curtain speech and crawled to my feet. He threw the Mark III file at me and went back to scratching in his papers. Just as I reached the door, he looked up and impaled me on his finger again.

“And don’t get any fancy ideas about jumping your contract. We can attach that bank account of yours on Algol II long before you could draw the money out.”

I smiled, a little weakly, I’m afraid, as if I had never meant to keep that account a secret. His spies were getting more efficient every day. Walking down the hall, I tried to figure a way to transfer the money without his catching on—and knew at the same time he was figuring a way to outfigure me.

It was all very depressing, so I stopped for a drink, then went on to the spaceport.

By the time the ship was serviced, I had a course charted. The nearest beacon to the broken-down Proxima Centauri Beacon was on one of the planets of Beta Circinus and I headed there first, a short trip of only about nine days in hyperspace.

To understand the importance of the beacons, you have to understand hyperspace. Not that many people do, but it is easy enough to understand that in this *non*-space the regular rules don’t apply. Speed and measurements are a matter of relationship, not constant facts like the fixed universe.

The first ships to enter hyperspace had no place to go—and no way to even tell if they had moved. The beacons solved that problem and opened the entire universe. They are built on planets and generate tremendous amounts of power. This power is turned into radiation that is punched through into hyperspace. Every beacon has a code signal as part of its radiation and represents a measurable point in hyperspace. Triangulation and quadrature of the beacons works for navigation—only it follows its own rules. The rules are complex and variable, but they are still rules that a navigator can follow.

For a hyperspace jump, you need at least four beacons for an accurate fix. For long jumps, navigators use as many as seven or eight. So every beacon is important and every one has to keep operating. That is where I and the other trouble-shooters came in.

We travel in well-stocked ships that carry a little bit of everything; only one man to a ship because that is all it takes to operate the overly efficient repair machinery. Due to the very nature of our job, we spend most of our time just rocketing through normal space. After all, when a beacon breaks down, how do you find it?

Not through hyperspace. All you can do is approach as close as you can by using other beacons, then finish the trip in normal space. This can take months, and often does.

This job didn’t turn out to be quite that bad. I zeroed on the Beta Circinus

beacon and ran a complicated eight-point problem through the navigator, using every beacon I could get an accurate fix on. The computer gave me a course with an estimated point-of-arrival as well as a built-in safety factor I never could eliminate from the machine.

I would much rather take a chance of breaking through near some star than spend time just barreling through normal space, but apparently Tech knows this, too. They had a safety factor built into the computer so you couldn't end up inside a star no matter how hard you tried. I'm sure there was no humaneness in this decision. They just didn't want to lose the ship.

It was a twenty-hour jump, ship's time, and I came through in the middle of nowhere. The robot analyzer chuckled to itself and scanned all the stars, comparing them to the spectra of Proxima Centauri. It finally rang a bell and blinked a light. I peeped through the eyepiece.

A fast reading with the photocell gave me the apparent magnitude and a comparison with its absolute magnitude showed its distance. Not as bad as I had thought—a six-week run, give or take a few days. After feeding a course tape into the robot pilot, I strapped into the acceleration tank and went to sleep.

The time went fast. I rebuilt my camera for about the twentieth time and just about finished a correspondence course in nucleonics. Most repairmen take these courses. Besides their always coming in handy, the company grades your pay by the number of specialties you can handle. All this, with some oil painting and free-fall workouts in the gym, passed the time. I was asleep when the alarm went off that announced planetary distance.

Planet two, where the beacon was situated according to the old charts, was a mushy-looking, wet kind of globe. I tried to make sense out of the ancient directions and finally located the right area. Staying outside the atmosphere, I sent a flying eye down to look things over. In this business, you learn early when and where to risk your own skin. The eye would be good enough for the preliminary survey.

The old boys had enough brains to choose a traceable site for the beacon, equidistant on a line between two of the most prominent mountain peaks. I located the peaks easily enough and started the eye out from the first peak and kept it on a course directly toward the second. There was a nose and tail radar in the eye and I fed their signals into a scope as an amplitude curve. When the two peaks coincided, I spun the eye controls and dived the thing down.

I cut out the radar and cut in the nose orthicon and sat back to watch the beacon appear on the screen.



The image blinked, focused—and a great damn pyramid swam into view. I cursed and wheeled the eye in circles, scanning the surrounding country. It was flat, marshy bottom land without a bump. The only thing in a ten-mile circle was this pyramid—and that definitely wasn't my beacon.

Or wasn't it?

I dived the eye lower. The pyramid was a crude-looking thing of undressed stone, without carvings or decorations. There was a shimmer of light from the top and I took a closer look at it. On the peak of the pyramid was a hollow basin filled with water. When I saw that, something clicked in my mind.

Locking the eye in a circular course, I dug through the Mark III plans—and there it was. The beacon had a precipitating field and a basin on top of it for water; this was used to cool the reactor that powered the monstrosity. If the water was still there, the beacon was still there—inside the pyramid. The natives, who, of course, weren't even mentioned by the idiots who constructed the thing, had built a nice heavy, thick stone pyramid around the beacon.

I took another look at the screen and realized that I had locked the eye into

a circular orbit about twenty feet above the pyramid. The summit of the stone pile was now covered with lizards of some type, apparently the local life-form. They had what looked like throwing sticks and arbalasts and were trying to shoot down the eye, a cloud of arrows and rocks flying in every direction.

I pulled the eye straight up and away and threw in the control circuit that would return it automatically to the ship.

Then I went to the galley for a long, strong drink. My beacon was not only locked inside a mountain of handmade stone, but I had managed to irritate the things who had built the pyramid. A great beginning for a job and one clearly designed to drive a stronger man than me to the bottle.

Normally, a repairman stays away from native cultures. They are poison. Anthropologists may not mind being dissected for their science, but a repairman wants to make no sacrifices of any kind for his job. For this reason, most beacons are built on uninhabited planets. If a beacon *has* to go on a planet with a culture, it is usually built in some inaccessible place.

Why this beacon had been built within reach of the local claws, I had yet to find out. But that would come in time. The first thing to do was make contact. To make contact, you have to know the local language.

And, for *that*, I had long before worked out a system that was fool-proof.

I had a pryeye of my own construction. It looked like a piece of rock about a foot long. Once on the ground, it would never be noticed, though it was a little disconcerting to see it float by. I located a lizard town about a thousand kilometers from the pyramid and dropped the eye. It swished down and landed at night in the bank of the local mud wallow. This was a favorite spot that drew a good crowd during the day. In the morning, when the first wallowers arrived, I flipped on the recorder.

After about five of the local days, I had a sea of native conversation in the memory bank of the machine translator and had tagged a few expressions. This is fairly easy to do when you have a machine memory to work with. One of the lizards gargled at another one and the second one turned around. I tagged this expression with the phrase, "Hey, George!" and waited my chance to use it. Later the same day, I caught one of them alone and shouted "Hey, George!" at him. It gurgled out through the speaker in the local tongue and he turned around.

When you get enough reference phrases like this in the memory bank, the MT brain takes over and starts filling in the missing pieces. As soon as the MT could give a running translation of any conversation it heard, I figured it was time to make a contact.

I found him easily enough. He was the Centaurian version of a goat-boy—he herded a particularly loathsome form of local life in the swamps outside the town. I had one of the working eyes dig a cave in an outcropping of rock and wait for him.

When he passed next day, I whispered into the mike: "Welcome, O Goat-

boy Grandson! This is your grandfather's spirit speaking from paradise." This fitted in with what I could make out of the local religion.

Goat-boy stopped as if he'd been shot. Before he could move, I pushed a switch and a handful of the local currency, wampum-type shells, rolled out of the cave and landed at his feet.

"Here is some money from paradise, because you have been a good boy." Not really from paradise—I had lifted it from the treasury the night before. "Come back tomorrow and we will talk some more," I called after the fleeing figure. I was pleased to notice that he took the cash before taking off.

After that, Grandpa in paradise had many heart-to-heart talks with Grandson, who found the heavenly loot more than he could resist. Grandpa had been out of touch with things since his death and Goat-boy happily filled him in.

I learned all I needed to know of the history, past and recent, and it wasn't nice.

In addition to the pyramid being around the beacon, there was a nice little religious war going on around the pyramid.

It all began with the land bridge. Apparently the local lizards had been living in the swamps when the beacon was built, but the builders didn't think much of them. They were a low type and confined to a distant continent. The idea that the race would develop and might reach *this* continent never occurred to the beacon mechanics. Which is, of course, what happened.

A little geological turnover, a swampy land bridge formed in the right spot, and the lizards began to wander up beacon valley. And found religion. A shiny metal temple out of which poured a constant stream of magic water—the reactor-cooling water pumped down from the atmosphere condenser on the roof. The radioactivity in the water didn't hurt the natives. It caused mutations that bred true.

A city was built around the temple and, through the centuries, the pyramid was put up around the beacon. A special branch of the priesthood served the temple. All went well until one of the priests violated the temple and destroyed the holy waters. There had been revolt, strife, murder and destruction since then. But still the holy waters would not flow. Now armed mobs fought around the temple each day and a new band of priests guarded the sacred fount.

And I had to walk into the middle of that mess and repair the thing.

It would have been easy enough if we were allowed a little mayhem. I could have had a lizard fry, fixed the beacon and taken off. Only "native life-forms" were quite well protected. There were spy cells on my ship, all of which I hadn't found, that would cheerfully rat on me when I got back.

Diplomacy was called for. I sighed and dragged out the plastiflesh equipment.

Working from 3D snaps of Grandson, I modeled a passable reptile head over my own features. It was a little short in the jaw, me not having one of

their toothy mandibles, but that was all right. I didn't have to look *exactly* like them, just something close, to soothe the native mind. It's logical. If I were an ignorant aborigine of Earth and I ran into a Spican, who looks like a two-foot gob of dried shellac, I would immediately leave the scene. However, if the Spican was wearing a suit of plastiflesh that looked remotely humanoid, I would at least stay and talk to him. This was what I was aiming to do with the Centaurians.

When the head was done, I peeled it off and attached it to an attractive suit of green plastic, complete with tail. I was really glad they had tails. The lizards didn't wear clothes and I wanted to take along a lot of electronic equipment. I built the tail over a metal frame that anchored around my waist. Then I filled the frame with all the equipment I would need and began to wire the suit.

When it was done, I tried it on in front of a full-length mirror. It was horrible but effective. The tail dragged me down in the rear and gave me a duck-waddle, but that only helped the resemblance.

That night I took the ship down into the hills nearest the pyramid, an out-of-the-way dry spot where the amphibious natives would never go. A little before dawn, the eye hooked onto my shoulders and we sailed straight up. We hovered above the temple at about 2,000 meters, until it was light, then dropped straight down.

It must have been a grand sight. The eye was camouflaged to look like a flying lizard, sort of a cardboard pterodactyl, and the slowly flapping wings obviously had nothing to do with our flight. But it was impressive enough for the natives. The first one that spotted me screamed and dropped over on his back. The others came running. They milled and mobbed and piled on top of one another, and by that time I had landed in the plaza fronting the temple. The priesthood arrived.

I folded my arms in a regal stance. "Greetings, O noble servers of the Great God," I said. Of course I didn't say it out loud, just whispered loud enough for the throat mike to catch. This was radioed back to the MT and the translation shot back to a speaker in my jaws.

The natives chomped and rattled and the translation rolled out almost instantly. I had the volume turned up and the whole square echoed.

Some of the more credulous natives prostrated themselves and others fled screaming. One doubtful type raised a spear, but no one else tried that after the pterodactyl-eye picked him up and dropped him in the swamp. The priests were a hard-headed lot and weren't buying any lizards in a poke; they just stood and muttered. I had to take the offensive again.

"Begone, O faithful steed," I said to the eye, and pressed the control in my palm at the same time.

It took off straight up a bit faster than I wanted; little pieces of wind-torn plastic rained down. While the crowd was ogling this ascent, I walked through the temple doors.

“I would talk with you, O noble priests,” I said.

Before they could think up a good answer, I was inside.

The temple was a small one built against the base of the pyramid. I hoped I wasn’t breaking too many taboos by going in. I wasn’t stopped, so it looked all right. The temple was a single room with a murky-looking pool at one end. Sloshing in the pool was an ancient reptile who clearly was one of the leaders. I waddled toward him and he gave me a cold and fishy eye, then growled something.

The MT whispered into my ear, “Just what in the name of the thirteenth sin are you and what are you doing here?”

I drew up my scaly figure in a noble gesture and pointed toward the ceiling. “I come from your ancestors to help you. I am here to restore the Holy Waters.”

This raised a buzz of conversation behind me, but got no rise out of the chief. He sank slowly into the water until only his eyes were showing. I could almost hear the wheels turning behind that moss-covered forehead. Then he lunged up and pointed a dripping finger at me.

“You are a liar! You are no ancestor of ours! We will—”

“Stop!” I thundered before he got so far in that he couldn’t back out. “I said your ancestors sent me as emissary—I am not one of your ancestors. Do not try to harm me or the wrath of those who have Passed On will turn against you.”

When I said this, I turned to jab a claw at the other priests, using the motion to cover my flicking a coin grenade toward them. It blew a nice hole in the floor with a great show of noise and smoke.

The First Lizard knew I was talking sense then and immediately called a meeting of the shamans. It, of course, took place in the public bathtub and I had to join them there. We jawed and gurgled for about an hour and settled all the major points.

I found out that they were new priests; the previous ones had all been boiled for letting the Holy Waters cease. They found out I was there only to help them restore the flow of the waters. They bought this, tentatively, and we all heaved out of the tub and trickled muddy paths across the floor. There was a bolted and guarded door that led into the pyramid proper. While it was being opened, the First Lizard turned to me.

“Undoubtedly you know of the rule,” he said. “Because the old priests did pry and peer, it was ruled henceforth that only the blind could enter the Holy of Holies.” I’d swear he was smiling, if thirty teeth peeking out of what looked like a crack in an old suitcase can be called smiling.

He was also signaling to him an underpriest who carried a brazier of charcoal complete with red-hot irons. All I could do was stand and watch as he stirred up the coals, pulled out the ruddiest iron and turned toward me. He was just drawing a bead on my right eyeball when my brain got back in gear.

“Of course,” I said, “blinding is only right. But in my case you will have to

blind me before I *leave* the Holy of Holies, not now. I need my eyes to see and mend the Fount of Holy Waters. Once the waters flow again, I will laugh as I hurl myself on the burning iron.”

He took a good thirty seconds to think it over and had to agree with me. The local torturer sniffled a bit and threw a little more charcoal on the fire. The gate crashed open and I stalked through; then it banged to behind me and I was alone in the dark.

But not for long—there was a shuffling nearby and I took a chance and turned on my flash. Three priests were groping toward me, their eye-sockets red pits of burned flesh. They knew what I wanted and led the way without a word.

A crumbling and cracked stone stairway brought us up to a solid metal doorway labeled in archaic script *MARK III BEACON—AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY*. The trusting builders counted on the sign to do the whole job, for there wasn’t a trace of a lock on the door. One lizard merely turned the handle and we were inside the beacon.

I unzipped the front of my camouflage suit and pulled out the blueprints. With the faithful priests stumbling after me, I located the control room and turned on the lights. There was a residue of charge in the emergency batteries, just enough to give a dim light. The meters and indicators looked to be in good shape; if anything, unexpectedly bright from constant polishing.

I checked the readings carefully and found just what I had suspected. One of the eager lizards had managed to open a circuit box and had polished the switches inside. While doing this, he had thrown one of the switches and that had caused the trouble.

Rather, that had *started* the trouble. It wasn’t going to be ended by just reversing the water-valve switch. This valve was supposed to be used only for repairs, after the pile was damped. When the water was cut off with the pile in operation, it had started to overheat and the automatic safeties had dumped the charge down the pit.

I could start the water again easily enough, but there was no fuel left in the reactor.

I wasn’t going to play with the fuel problem at all. It would be far easier to install a new power plant. I had one in the ship that was about a tenth the size of the ancient bucket of bolts and produced at least four times the power. Before I sent for it, I checked over the rest of the beacon. In 2000 years, there should be *some* sign of wear.

The old boys had built well, I’ll give them credit for that. Ninety per cent of the machinery had no moving parts and had suffered no wear whatever. Other parts they had beefed up, figuring they would wear, but slowly. The water-feed pipe from the roof, for example. The pipe walls were at least three meters thick—and the pipe opening itself no bigger than my head. There were some things I could do, though, and I made a list of parts.

The parts, the new power plant and a few other odds and ends were chuted

into a neat pile on the ship. I checked all the parts by screen before they were loaded in a metal crate. In the darkest hour before dawn, the heavy-duty eye dropped the crate outside the temple and darted away without being seen.

I watched the priests through the pryeye while they tried to open it. When they had given up, I boomed orders at them through a speaker in the crate. They spent most of the day sweating the heavy box up through the narrow temple stairs and I enjoyed a good sleep. It was resting inside the beacon door when I woke up.

The repairs didn't take long, though there was plenty of groaning from the blind lizards when they heard me ripping the wall open to get at the power leads. I even hooked a gadget to the water pipe so their Holy Waters would have the usual refreshing radioactivity when they started flowing again. The moment this was all finished, I did the job they were waiting for.

I threw the switch that started the water flowing again.

There were a few minutes while the water began to gurgle down through the dry pipe. Then a roar came from outside the pyramid that must have shaken its stone walls. Shaking my hands once over my head, I went down for the eye-burning ceremony.

The blind lizards were waiting for me by the door and looked even unhappier than usual. When I tried the door, I found out why—it was bolted and barred from the other side.

"It has been decided," a lizard said, "that you shall remain here forever and tend the Holy Waters. We will stay with you and serve your every need."

A delightful prospect, eternity spent in a locked beacon with three blind lizards. In spite of their hospitality, I couldn't accept.

"What—you dare interfere with the messenger of your ancestors!" I had the speaker on full volume and the vibration almost shook my head off.

The lizards cringed and I set my Solar for a narrow beam and ran it around the door jamb. There was a great crunching and banging from the junk piled against it, and then the door swung free. I threw it open. Before they could protest, I had pushed the priests out through it.

The rest of their clan showed up at the foot of the stairs and made a great ruckus while I finished welding the door shut. Running through the crowd, I faced up to the First Lizard in his tub. He sank slowly beneath the surface.

"What lack of courtesy!" I shouted. He made little bubbles in the water. "The ancestors are annoyed and have decided to forbid entrance to the Inner Temple forever; though, out of kindness, they will let the waters flow. Now I must return—on with the ceremony!"

The torture-master was too frightened to move, so I grabbed out his hot iron. A touch on the side of my face dropped a steel plate over my eyes, under the plastiskin. Then I jammed the iron hard into my phony eye-sockets and the plastic gave off an authentic odor.

A cry went up from the crowd as I dropped the iron and staggered in blind circles. I must admit it went off pretty well.

Before they could get any more bright ideas, I threw the switch and my plastic pterodactyl sailed in through the door. I couldn't see it, of course, but I knew it had arrived when the grapples in the claws latched onto the steel plates on my shoulders.

I had got turned around after the eye-burning and my flying beast hooked onto me backward. I had meant to sail out bravely, blind eyes facing into the sunset; instead, I faced the crowd as I soared away, so I made the most of a bad situation and threw them a snappy military salute. Then I was out in the fresh air and away.

When I lifted the plate and poked holes in the seared plastic, I could see the pyramid growing smaller behind me, water gushing out of the base and a happy crowd of reptiles sporting in its radioactive rush. I counted off on my talons to see if I had forgotten anything.

One: The beacon was repaired.

Two: The door was sealed, so there should be no more sabotage, accidental or deliberate.

Three: The priests should be satisfied. The water was running again, my eyes had been duly burned out, and they were back in business. Which added up to— Four: The fact that they would probably let another repairman in, under the same conditions, if the beacon conked out again. At least I had done nothing, like butchering a few of them, that would make them antagonistic toward future ancestral messengers.

I stripped off my tattered lizard suit back in the ship, very glad that it would be some other repairman who'd get the job.

The Misplaced Battleship
Illustrated by Schoenherr

It might seem a little careless to lose track of something as big as a battleship ... but interstellar space is on a different scale of magnitude. But a misplaced battleship—in the wrong hands!—can be most dangerous.

Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from *Astounding Science Fiction* April 1960. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed. Minor spelling and typographical errors have been corrected without note.

WHEN it comes to picking locks and cracking safes I admit to no master. The door to Inskipp's private quarters had an old-fashioned tumbler drum that was easier to pick than my teeth. I must have gone through that door without breaking step. Quiet as I was though, Inskipp still heard me. The light came on and there he was sitting up in bed pointing a .75 caliber recoilless at my sternum.

"You should have more brains than that, diGriz," he snarled. "Creeping into my room at night! You could have been shot."

"No I couldn't," I told him, as he stowed the cannon back under his pillow. "A man with a curiosity bump as big as yours will always talk first and shoot later. And besides—none of this pussyfooting around in the dark would be necessary if your screen was open and I could have got a call through."

Inskipp yawned and poured himself a glass of water from the dispenser unit above the bed. "Just because I head the Special Corps, doesn't mean that I *am* the Special Corps," he said moistly while he drained the glass. "I have to sleep sometime. My screen is open only for emergency calls, not for every agent who needs his hand held."

"Meaning I am in the hand-holding category?" I asked with as much sweetness as I could.

"Put yourself in any category you please," he grumbled as he slumped down in the bed. "And also put yourself out into the hall and see me tomorrow during working hours."

He was at my mercy, really. He wanted sleep so much. And he was going to be wide awake so very soon.

"Do you know what this is?" I asked him, poking a large glossy pic under his long broken nose. One eye opened slowly.

"Big warship of some kind, looks like Empire lines. Now for the last time—go away!" he said.

"A very good guess for this late at night," I told him cheerily. "It is a late Empire battleship of the Warlord class. Undoubtedly one of the most truly efficient engines of destruction ever manufactured. Over a half mile of defensive screens and armament, that could probably turn any fleet existent today into fine radioactive ash—"

"Except for the fact that the last one was broken up for scrap over a thousand years ago," he mumbled.

I leaned over and put my lips close to his ear. So there would be no chance of misunderstanding. Speaking softly, but clearly.

"True, true," I said. "But wouldn't you be just a *little* bit interested if I was to tell you that one is being built today?"

Oh, it was beautiful to watch. The covers went one way and Inskipp went the other. In a single unfolding, in concerted motion he left the horizontal and recumbent and stood tensely vertical against the wall. Examining the pic of the battleship under the light. He apparently did not believe in pajama bottoms and it hurt me to see the goose-bumps rising on those thin shanks. But if the

legs were thin, the voice was more than full enough to make up for the difference.

"Talk, blast you diGriz—*talk!*" he roared. "What is this nonsense about a battleship? Who's building it?"

I had my nail file out and was touching up a cuticle, holding it out for inspection before I said anything. From the corner of my eye I could see him getting purple about the face—but he kept quiet. I savored my small moment of power.

"Put diGriz in charge of the record room for a while, you said, that way he can learn the ropes. Burrowing around in century-old, dusty files will be just the thing for a free spirit like Slippery Jim diGriz. Teach him discipline. Show him what the Corps stands for. At the same time it will get the records in shape. They have been needing reorganization for quite a while."

Inskipp opened his mouth, made a choking noise, then closed it. He undoubtedly realized that any interruption would only lengthen my explanation, not shorten it. I smiled and nodded at his decision, then continued.



"So you thought you had me safely out of the way. Breaking my spirit under the guise of 'giving me a little background in the Corps' activities.' In this sense your plan failed. Something else happened instead. I nosed through the files and found them most interesting. Particularly the C & M setup—the Categorizer and Memory. That building full of machinery that takes in and

digests news and reports from all the planets in the galaxy, indexes it to every category it can possibly relate, then files it. Great machine to work with. I had it digging out spaceship info for me, something I have always been interested in—"

"You should be," Inskipp interrupted rudely. "You've stolen enough of them in your time."

I gave him a hurt look and went on—slowly. "I won't bore you with all the details, since you seem impatient, but eventually I turned up this plan." He had it out of my fingers before it cleared my wallet.

"What are you getting at?" he mumbled as he ran his eyes over the blueprints. "This is an ordinary heavy-cargo and passenger job. It's no more a Warlord battleship than I am."

It is hard to curl your lips with contempt and talk at the same time, but I succeeded. "Of course. You don't expect them to file warship plans with the League Registry, do you? But, as I said, I know more than a little bit about ships. It seemed to me this thing was just too big for the use intended. Enough old ships are fuel-wasters, you don't have to build new ones to do that. This started me thinking and I punched for a complete list of ships that size that had been constructed in the past. You can imagine my surprise when, after three minutes of groaning, the C & M only produced six. One was built for self-sustaining colony attempt at the second galaxy. For all we know she is still on the way. The other five were all D-class colonizers, built during the Expansion when large populations were moved. Too big to be practical now.

"I was still teased, as I had no idea what a ship this large could be used for. So I removed the time interlock on the C & M and let it pick around through the entire history of space to see if it could find a comparison. It sure did. Right at the Golden Age of Empire expansion, the giant Warlord battleships. The machine even found a blueprint for me."

Inskipp grabbed again and began comparing the two prints. I leaned over his shoulder and pointed out the interesting parts.

"Notice—if the engine room specs are changed slightly to include this cargo hold, there is plenty of room for the brutes needed. This superstructure—obviously just tacked onto the plans—gets thrown away, and turrets take its place. The hulls are identical. A change here, a shift there, and the stodgy freighter becomes the fast battlegewagon. These changes could be made during construction, then plans filed. By the time anyone in the League found out what was being built the ship would be finished and launched. Of course, this could all be coincidence—the plans of a newly built ship agreeing to six places with those of a ship built a thousand years ago. But if you think so, I will give you hundred-to-one odds you are wrong, any size bet you name."

I wasn't winning any sucker bets that night. Inskipp had led just as crooked a youth as I had, and needed no help in smelling a fishy deal. While he pulled on his clothes he shot questions at me.

"And the name of the peace-loving planet that is building this bad memory

from the past?"

"Cittanuvo. Second planet of a B star in Corona Borealis. No other colonized planets in the system."

"Never heard of it," Inskipp said as we took the private drop chute to his office. "Which may be a good or a bad sign. Wouldn't be the first time trouble came from some out-of-the-way spot I never even knew existed."

With the automatic disregard for others of the truly dedicated, he pressed the scramble button on his desk. Very quickly sleepy-eyed clerks and assistants were bringing files and records. We went through them together.

Modesty prevented me from speaking first, but I had a very short wait before Inskipp reached the same conclusion I had. He hurled a folder the length of the room and scowled out at the harsh dawn light.

"The more I look at this thing," he said, "the fishier it gets. This planet seems to have no possible motive or use for a battleship. But they are building one—that I will swear on a stack of one thousand credit notes as high as this building. Yet what will they do with it when they have it built? They have an expanding culture, no unemployment, a surplus of heavy metals and ready markets for all they produce. No hereditary enemies, feuds or the like. If it wasn't for this battleship thing, I would call them an ideal League planet. I have to know more about them."

"I've already called the spaceport—in your name of course," I told him. "Ordered a fast courier ship. I'll leave within the hour."

"Aren't you getting a little ahead of yourself, diGriz," he said. Voice chill as the icecap. "I still give the orders and I'll tell you when you're ready for an independent command."

I was sweetness and light because a lot depended on his decision. "Just trying to help, chief, get things ready in case you wanted more info. And this isn't really an operation, just a reconnaissance. I can do that as well as any of the experienced operators. And it may give me the experience I need, so that some day, I, too, will be qualified to join the ranks...."

"All right," he said. "Stop shoveling it on while I can still breathe. Get out there. Find out what is going on. Then get back. Nothing else—and that's an order."

By the way he said it, I knew he thought there was little chance of its happening that way. Since my forced induction into the Corps six months earlier I had been stuck on this super-secret planetoid that was its headquarters and main base. I had very little sitting-down patience anyway, and it had been long since exhausted.

It had been interesting at first. Particularly since up until the time I was drafted into the Special Corps I wasn't even certain it really existed. It was too much like a con man's nightmare to be real. A secret worry. After a few happy years of successful crime you begin to wonder how long it will last. Planetary police are all pushovers and you start to feel you can go on forever if they're your only competition. What about the League though? Don't they take any

interest in crime? Just about that time you hear your first rumor of the Special Corps and it fits the bad dreams. A shadowy, powerful group that slip silently between the stars, ready to bring the interstellar lawbreaker low. Sounds like TV drama stuff. I had been quite surprised to find they really existed.

I was even more surprised when I joined them. Of course there was a little pressure at the time. I had the alternative choice of instant death. But I still think it was a wise move. Under the motto "Set a thief to catch one," the Corps supposedly made good use of men like myself to get rid of the more antisocial types that infest the universe.

This was still all hearsay to me. I had been pulled into headquarters and given routine administration work for training. Six months of this had me slightly ga-ga and I wanted out. Since no one seemed to be in a hurry to give me an assignment I had found one for myself. I had no idea of what would come if it, but I also had no intention of returning until the job was done.

A quick stop at supply and record sections gave me everything I needed. The sun was barely clear of the horizon when the silver needle of my ship lifted in the gray field, then blasted into space.

The trip took only a few days, more than enough time to memorize everything I needed to know about Cittanuvo. And the more I knew the less I could understand their need for a battleship. It didn't fit. Cittanuvo was a secondary settlement out of the Cellini system, and I had run into these settlements before. They were all united in a loose alliance and bickered a lot among themselves, but never came to blows. If anything, they shared a universal abhorrence of war.

Yet they were secretly building a battleship.

Since I was only chasing my tail with this line of thought, I put it out of my mind and worked on some tri-di chess problems. This filled the time until Cittanuvo blinked into the bow screen.

One of my most effective mottoes has always been, "Secrecy can be an obviousity." What the magicians call misdirection. Let people very obviously see what you want them to see, then they'll never notice what is hidden. This was why I landed at midday, on the largest field on the planet, after a very showy approach. I was already dressed for my role, and out of the ship before the landing braces stopped vibrating. Buckling the fur cape around my shoulders with the platinum clasp, I stamped down the ramp. The sturdy little M-3 robot rumbled after me with my bags. Heading directly towards the main gate, I ignored the scurry of activity around the customs building. Only when a uniformed under-official of some kind ran over to me, did I give the field any attention.

Before he could talk I did, foot in the door and stay on top.

"Beautiful planet you have here. Delightful climate! Ideal spot for a country home. Friendly people, always willing to help strangers and all that I imagine. That's what I like. Makes me feel grateful. Very pleased to meet you. I am the Grand Duke Sant' Angelo." I shook his hand enthusiastically at this point and

let a one hundred credit note slip into his palm.

"Now," I added, "I wonder if you would ask the customs agents to look at my bags here. Don't want to waste time, do we? The ship is open, they can check that whenever they please."

My manner, clothes, jewelry, the easy way I passed money around and the luxurious sheen of my bags, could mean only one thing. There was little that was worth smuggling into or out of Cittanuvo. Certainly nothing a rich man would be interested in. The official murmured something with a smile, spoke a few words into his phone, and the job was done.

A small wave of custom men hung stickers on my luggage, peeked into one or two for conformity's sake, and waved me through. I shook hands all around—a rustling hand-clasp of course—then was on my way. A cab was summoned, a hotel suggested. I nodded agreement and settled back while the robot loaded the bags about me.

The ship was completely clean. Everything I might need for the job was in my luggage. Some of it quite lethal and explosive, and very embarrassing if it was discovered in my bags. In the safety of my hotel suite I made a change of clothes and personality. After the robot had checked the rooms for bugs.

And very nice gadgets too, these Corps robots. It looked and acted like a moron M-3 all the time. It was anything but. The brain was as good as any other robot brain I have known, plus the fact that the chunky body was crammed with devices and machines of varying use. It chugged slowly around the room, moving my bags and laying out my kit. And all the time following a careful route that covered every inch of the suite. When it had finished it stopped and called the all-clear.

"All rooms checked. Results negative except for one optic bug in that wall."

"Should you be pointing like that?" I asked the robot. "Might make people suspicious, you know."

"Impossible," the robot said with mechanical surety. "I brushed against it and it is now unserviceable."

With this assurance I pulled off my flashy clothes and slipped into the midnight black dress uniform of an admiral in the League Grand Fleet. It came complete with decorations, gold bullion, and all the necessary documents. I thought it a little showy myself, but it was just the thing to make the right impression on Cittanuvo. Like many other planets, this one was uniform-conscious. Delivery boys, street cleaners, clerks—all had to have characteristic uniforms. Much prestige attached to them, and my black dress outfit should rate as high as any uniform in the galaxy.

A long cloak would conceal the uniform while I left the hotel, but the gold-encrusted helmet and a brief case of papers were a problem. I had never explored all the possibilities of the pseudo M-3 robot, perhaps it could be of help.

"You there, short and chunky," I called. "Do you have any concealed compartments or drawers built into your steel hide? If so, let's see."

For a second I thought the robot had exploded. The thing had more drawers in it than a battery of cash registers. Big, small, flat, thin, they shot out on all sides. One held a gun and two more were stuffed with grenades; the rest were empty. I put the hat in one, the brief case in another and snapped my fingers. The drawers slid shut and its metal hide was as smooth as ever.

I pulled on a fancy sports cap, buckled the cape up tight, and was ready to go. The luggage was all booby-trapped and could defend itself. Guns, gas, poison needles, the usual sort of thing. In the last resort it would blow itself up. The M-3 went down by a freight elevator. I used a back stairs and we met in the street.

Since it was still daylight I didn't take a heli, but rented a groundcar instead. We had a leisurely drive out into the country and reached President Ferraro's house after dark.

As befitted the top official of a rich planet, the place was a mansion. But the security precautions were ludicrous to say the least. I took myself and a three hundred fifty kilo robot through the guards and alarms without causing the slightest stir. President Ferraro, a bachelor, was eating his dinner. This gave me enough undisturbed time to search his study.

There was absolutely nothing. Nothing to do with wars or battleships that is. If I had been interested in blackmail I had enough evidence in my hand to support me for life. I was looking for something bigger than political corruption, however.

When Ferraro rolled into his study after dinner the room was dark. I heard him murmur something about the servants and fumble for the switch. Before he found it, the robot closed the door and turned on the lights. I sat behind his desk, all his personal papers before me—weighted down with a pistol—and as fierce a scowl as I could raise smeared across my face. Before he got over the shock I snapped an order at him.

"Come over here and sit down, *quick!*"

The robot hustled him across the room at the same time, so he had no choice except to obey. When he saw the papers on the desk his eyes bulged and he just gurgled a little. Before he could recover I threw a thick folder in front of him.

"I am Admiral Thar, League Grand Fleet. These are my credentials. You had better check them." Since they were as good as any real admiral's I didn't worry in the slightest. Ferraro went through them as carefully as he could in his rattled state, even checking the seals under UV. It gave him time to regain a bit of control and he used it to bluster.

"What do you mean by entering my private quarters and burgling—"

"You're in very bad trouble," I said in as gloomy a voice as I could muster.

Ferraro's tanned face went a dirty gray at my words. I pressed the advantage.

"I am arresting you for conspiracy, extortion, theft, and whatever other charges develop after a careful review of these documents. Seize him." This

last order was directed at the robot who was well briefed in its role. It rumbled forward and locked its hand around Ferraro's wrist, handcuff style. He barely noticed.

"I can explain," he said desperately. "Everything can be explained. There is no need to make such charges. I don't know what papers you have there, so I wouldn't attempt to say they are all forgeries. I have many enemies you know. If the League knew the difficulties faced on a backward planet like this...."

"That will be entirely enough," I snapped, cutting him off with a wave of my hand. "All those questions will be answered by a court at the proper time. There is only one question I want an answer to now. Why are you building that battleship?"

The man was a great actor. His eyes opened wide, his jaw dropped, he sank back into the chair as if he had been tapped lightly with a hammer. When he managed to speak the words were completely unnecessary; he had already registered every evidence of injured innocence.

"What battleship!" he gasped.

"The Warlord class battleship that is being built at the Cenerentola Spaceyards. Disguised behind these blueprints." I threw them across the desk to him, and pointed to one corner. "Those are your initials there, authorizing construction."

Ferraro still had the baffled act going as he fumbled with the papers, examined the initials and such. I gave him plenty of time. He finally put them down, shaking his head.

"I know nothing about any battleship. These are the plans for a new cargo liner. Those are my initials, I recall putting them there."

I phrased my question carefully, as I had him right where I wanted him now. "You deny any knowledge of the Warlord battleship that is being built from these modified plans."

"These are the plans for an ordinary passenger-freighter, that is all I know."

His words had the simple innocence of a young child's. Was he ever caught. I sat back with a relaxed sigh and lit a cigar.

"Wouldn't you be interested in knowing something about that robot who is holding you," I said. He looked down, as if aware for the first time that the robot had been holding him by the wrist during the interview. "That is no ordinary robot. It has a number of interesting devices built into its fingertips. Thermocouples, galvanometers, things like that. While you talked it registered your skin temperature, blood pressure, amount of perspiration and such. In other words it is an efficient and fast working lie detector. We will now hear all about your lies."

Ferraro pulled away from the robot's hand as if it had been a poisonous snake. I blew a relaxed smoke ring. "Report," I said to the robot. "Has this man told any lies?"

"Many," the robot said. "Exactly seventy-four per cent of all statements he made were fake."

"Very good," I nodded, throwing the last lock on my trap. "That means he knows all about this battleship."

"The subject has no knowledge of the battleship," the robot said coldly. "All of his statements concerning the construction of this ship were true."

Now it was my turn for the gaping and eye-popping act while Ferraro pulled himself together. He had no idea I wasn't interested in his other hanky-panky, but could tell I had had a low blow. It took an effort, but I managed to get my mind back into gear and consider the evidence.



If President Ferraro didn't know about the battleship, he must have been taken in by the cover-up job. But if he wasn't responsible—who was? Some

militaristic clique that meant to overthrow him and take power? I didn't know enough about the planet, so I enlisted Ferraro on my side.

This was easy—even without the threat of exposure of the documents I had found in his files. Using their disclosure as a prod I could have made him jump through hoops. It wasn't necessary. As soon as I showed him the different blueprints and explained the possibilities he understood. If anything, he was more eager than I was to find out who was using his administration as a cat's-paw. By silent agreement the documents were forgotten.

We agreed that the next logical step would be the Cenerentola Spaceyards. He had some idea of sniffing around quietly first, trying to get a line to his political opponents. I gave him to understand that the League, and the League Navy in particular, wanted to stop the construction of the battleship. After that he could play his politics. With this point understood he called his car and squadron of guards and we made a parade to the shipyards. It was a four-hour drive and we made plans on the way down.

The spaceyard manager was named Rocca, and he was happily asleep when we arrived. But not for long. The parade of uniforms and guns in the middle of the night had him frightened into a state where he could hardly walk. I imagine he was as full of petty larceny as Ferraro. No innocent man could have looked so terror stricken. Taking advantage of the situation, I latched my motorized lie detector onto him and began snapping the questions.

Even before I had all the answers I began to get the drift of things. They were a little frightening, too. The manager of the spaceyard that was building the ship had no idea of its true nature.

Anyone with less self-esteem than myself—or who had led a more honest early life—might have doubted his own reasoning at that moment. I didn't. The ship on the ways *still* resembled a warship to six places. And knowing human nature the way I do, that was too much of a coincidence to expect. Occam's razor always points the way. If there are two choices to take, take the simpler. In this case I chose the natural acquisitive instinct of man as opposed to blind chance and accident. Nevertheless I put the theory to the test.

Looking over the original blueprints again, the big superstructure hit my eye. In order to turn the ship into a warship that would have to be one of the first things to go.

"Rocca!" I barked, in what I hoped was authentic old space-dog manner. "Look at these plans, at this space-going front porch here. Is it still being built onto the ship?"

He shook his head at once and said, "No, the plans were changed. We had to fit in some kind of new meteor-repelling gear for operating in the planetary debris belt."

I flipped through my case and drew out a plan. "Does your new gear look anything like this?" I asked, throwing it across the table to him.

He rubbed his jaw while he looked at it. "Well," he said hesitatingly, "I don't want to say for certain. After all these details aren't in my department,

I'm just responsible for final assembly, not unit work. But this surely looks like the thing they installed. Big thing. Lots of power leads—"

It was a battleship all right, no doubt of that now. I was mentally reaching around to pat myself on the back when the meaning of his words sank in.

"Installed!" I shouted. "Did you say installed?"

Rocca collapsed away from my roar and gnawed his nails. "Yes—" he said, "not too long ago. I remember there was some trouble...."

"And what else!" I interrupted him. Cold moisture was beginning to collect along my spine now. "The drives, controls—are they in, too?"

"Why, yes," he said. "How did you know? The normal scheduling was changed around, causing a great deal of unnecessary trouble."

The cold sweat was now a running river of fear. I was beginning to have the feeling that I had been missing the boat all along the line. The original estimated date of completion was nearly a year away. But there was no real reason why that couldn't be changed, too.

"Cars! Guns!" I bellowed. "To the spaceyard. If that ship is anywhere near completion, we are in big, *big* trouble!"

All the bored guards had a great time with the sirens, lights, accelerators on the floor and that sort of thing. We blasted a screaming hole through the night right to the spaceyard and through the gate.

It didn't make any difference, we were still too late. A uniformed watchman frantically waved to us and the whole convoy jerked to a stop.

The ship was gone.

Rocca couldn't believe it, neither could the president. They wandered up and down the empty ways where it had been built. I just crunched down in the back of the car, chewing my cigar to pieces and cursing myself for being a fool.

I had missed the obvious fact, being carried away by the thought of a planetary government building a warship. The government was involved for sure—but only as a pawn. No little planet-bound political mind could have dreamed up as big a scheme as this. I smelled a rat—a stainless steel one. Someone who operated the way I had done before my conversion.

Now that the rodent was well out of the bag I knew just where to look, and had a pretty good idea of what I would find. Rocca, the spaceyard manager, had staggered back and was pulling at his hair, cursing and crying at the same time. President Ferraro had his gun out and was staring at it grimly. It was hard to tell if he was thinking of murder or suicide. I didn't care which. All he had to worry about was the next election, when the voters and the political competition would carve him up for losing the ship. My troubles were a little bigger.

I had to find the battleship before it blasted its way across the galaxy.

"Rocca!" I shouted. "Get into the car. I want to see your records—*all* of your records—and I want to see them right now."

He climbed wearily in and had directed the driver before he fully realized

what was happening. Blinking at the sickly light of dawn brought him slowly back to reality.

"But ... admiral ... the hour! Everyone will be asleep...."

I just growled, but it was enough. Rocca caught the idea from my expression and grabbed the car phone. The office doors were open when we got there.

Normally I curse the paper tangles of bureaucracy, but this was one time when I blessed them all. These people had it down to a fine science. Not a rivet fell, but that its fall was noted—in quintuplicate. And later followed up with a memo, *rivet*, *wastage*, *query*. The facts I needed were all neatly tucked away in their paper catacombs. All I had to do was sniff them out. I didn't try to look for first causes, this would have taken too long. Instead I concentrated my attention on the recent modifications, like the gun turret, that would quickly give me a trail to the guilty parties.

Once the clerks understood what I had in mind they hurled themselves into their work, urged on by the fires of patriotism and the burning voices of their superiors. All I had to do was suggest a line of search and the relevant documents would begin appearing at once.

Bit by bit a pattern started to emerge. A delicate webwork of forgery, bribery, chicanery and falsehood. It could only have been conceived by a mind as brilliantly crooked as my own. I chewed my lip with jealousy. Like all great ideas, this one was basically simple.

A party or parties unknown had neatly warped the ship construction program to their own ends. Undoubtedly they had started the program for the giant transport, that would have to be checked later. And once the program was underway, it had been guided with a skill that bordered on genius. Orders were originated in many places, passed on, changed and shuffled. I painfully traced each one to its source. Many times the source was a forgery. Some changes seemed to be unexplainable, until I noticed the officers in question had a temporary secretary while their normal assistants were ill. All the girls had food poisoning, a regular epidemic it seemed. Each of them in turn had been replaced by the same girl. She stayed just long enough in each position to see that the battleship plan moved forward one more notch.

This girl was obviously the assistant to the Mastermind who originated the scheme. He sat in the center of the plot, like a spider on its web, pulling the strings that set things into motion. My first thought that a gang was involved proved wrong. All my secondary suspects turned out to be simple forgeries, not individuals. In the few cases where forgery wasn't adequate, my mysterious X had apparently hired himself to do the job. X himself had the permanent job of Assistant Engineering Designer. One by one the untangled threads ran to this office. He also had a secretary whose "illnesses" coincided with her employment in other offices.

When I straightened up from my desk the ache in my back stabbed like a hot wire. I swallowed a painkiller and looked around at my drooping, sack-

eyed assistants who had shared the sleepless seventy-two hour task. They sat or slumped against the furniture, waiting for my conclusions. Even President Ferraro was there, his hair looking scraggly where he had pulled out handfuls.

"You've found them, the criminal ring?" he asked, his fingers groping over his scalp for a fresh hold.

"I have found them, yes," I said hoarsely. "But not a criminal ring. An inspired master criminal—who apparently has more executive ability in one ear lobe than all your bribe-bloated bureaucrats—and his female assistant. They pulled the entire job by themselves. His name, or undoubtedly pseudoname, is Pepe Nero. The girl is called Angelina...."

"Arrest them at once! Guards ... guards—" Ferraro's voice died away as he ran out of the room. I talked to his vanishing back.

"That is just what we intend to do, but it's a little difficult at the moment since they are the ones who not only built the battleship, but undoubtedly stole it as well. It was fully automated so no crew is necessary."

"What do you plan to do?" one of the clerks asked.

"I shall do nothing," I told him, with the snapped precision of an old space dog. "The League fleet is already closing in on the renegades and you will be informed of the capture. Thank you for your assistance."

I threw them as snappy a salute as I could muster and they filed out. Staring gloomily at their backs I envied for one moment their simple faith in the League Navy. When in reality the vengeful fleet was just as imaginary as my admiral's rating. This was still a job for the Corps. Inskipp would have to be given the latest information at once. I had sent him a psigram about the theft, but there was no answer as yet. Maybe the identity of the thieves would stir some response out of him.

My message was in code, but it could be quickly broken if someone wanted to try hard enough. I took it to the message center myself. The psiman was in his transparent cubicle and I locked myself in with him. His eyes were unfocused as he spoke softly into a mike, pulling in a message from somewhere across the galaxy. Outside the rushing transcribers copied, coded and filed messages, but no sound penetrated the insulated wall. I waited until his attention clicked back into the room, and handed him the sheets of paper.

"League Central 14—rush," I told him.

He raised his eyebrows, but didn't ask any questions. Establishing contact only took a few seconds, as they had an entire battery of psimen for their communications. He read the code words carefully, shaping them with his mouth but not speaking aloud, the power of his thoughts carrying across the light-years of distance. As soon as he was finished I took back the sheet, tore it up and pocketed the pieces.

I had my answer back quickly enough, Inskipp must have been hovering around waiting for my message. The mike was turned off to the transcribers outside, and I took the code groups down in shorthand myself.

"... xybb dfil fdno, and if you don't—don't come back!"

The message broke into clear at the end and the psiman smiled as he spoke the words. I broke the point off my stylus and growled at him not to repeat *any* of this message, as it was classified, and I would personally see him shot if he did. That got rid of the smile, but didn't make me feel any better.

The decoded message turned out not to be as bad as I had imagined. Until further notice I was in charge of tracking and capturing the stolen battleship. I could call on the League for any aid I needed. I would keep my identity as an admiral for the rest of the job. I was to keep him informed of progress. Only those ominous last words in clear kept my happiness from being complete.

I had been handed my long-awaited assignment. But translated into simple terms my orders were to get the battleship, or it would be my neck. Never a word about my efforts in uncovering the plot in the first place. This is a heartless world we live in.

This moment of self-pity relaxed me and I immediately went to bed. Since my main job now was waiting, I could wait just as well asleep.

And waiting was all I could do. Of course there were secondary tasks, such as ordering a Naval cruiser for my own use, and digging for more information on the thieves, but these really were secondary to my main purpose. Which was waiting for bad news. There was no place I could go that would be better situated for the chase than Cittanuvo. The missing ship could have gone in any direction. With each passing minute the sphere of probable locations grew larger by the power of the squared cube. I kept the on-watch crew of the cruiser at duty stations and confined the rest within a one hundred yard radius of the ship.

There was little more information on Pepe and Angelina, they had covered their tracks well. Their origin was unknown, though the fact they both talked with a slight accent suggested an offworld origin. There was one dim picture of Pepe, chubby but looking too grim to be a happy fat boy. There was no picture of the girl. I shuffled the meager findings, controlled my impatience, and kept the ship's psiman busy pulling in all the reports of any kind of trouble in space. The navigator and I plotted their locations in his tank, comparing the positions in relation to the growing sphere that enclosed all the possible locations of the stolen ship. Some of the disasters and apparent accidents hit inside this area, but further investigation proved them all to have natural causes.

I had left standing orders that all reports falling inside the danger area were to be brought to me at any time. The messenger woke me from a deep sleep, turning on the light and handing me the slip of paper. I blinked myself awake, read the first two lines, and pressed the *action station* alarm over my bunk. I'll say this, the Navy boys know their business. When the sirens screamed, the crew secured ship and blasted off before I had finished reading the report. As soon as my eyeballs unsquashed back into focus I read it through, then once more, carefully, from the beginning.

It looked like the one we had been waiting for. There were no witnesses to

the tragedy, but a number of monitor stations had picked up the discharge static of a large energy weapon being fired. Triangulation had lead investigators to the spot where they found a freighter, *Ogget's Dream*, with a hole punched through it as big as a railroad tunnel. The freighter's cargo of plutonium was gone.

I read *Pepe* in every line of the message. Since he was flying an undermanned battleship, he had used it in the most efficient way possible. If he attempted to negotiate or threaten another ship, the element of chance would be introduced. So he had simply roared up to the unsuspecting freighter and blasted her with the monster guns his battleship packed. All eighteen men aboard had been killed instantly. The thieves were now murderers.

I was under pressure now to act. And under a greater pressure not to make any mistakes. Roly-poly Pepe had shown himself to be a ruthless killer. He knew what he wanted—then reached out and took it. Destroying anyone who stood in his way. More people would die before this was over, it was up to me to keep that number as small as possible.

Ideally I should have rushed out the fleet with guns blazing and dragged him to justice. Very nice, and I wished it could be done that way. Except where was he? A battleship may be gigantic on some terms of reference, but in the immensity of the galaxy it is microscopically infinitesimal. As long as it stayed out of the regular lanes of commerce, and clear of detector stations and planets, it would never be found.

Then how *could* I find it—and having found it, catch it? When the infernal thing was more than a match for any ship it might meet. That was my problem. It had kept me awake nights and talking to myself days, since there was no easy answer.

I had to construct a solution, slowly and carefully. Since I couldn't be sure where Pepe was going to be next, I had to make him go where I wanted him to.

There were some things in my favor. The most important was the fact I had forced him to make his play before he was absolutely ready. It wasn't chance that he had left the same day I arrived on Cittanuvu. Any plan as elaborate as his certainly included warning of approaching danger. The drive on the battleship, as well as controls and primary armament had been installed weeks before I showed up. Much of the subsidiary work remained to be done when the ship had left. One witness of the theft had graphically described the power lines and cables dangling from the ship's locks when she lifted.



My arrival had forced Pepe off balance. Now I had to keep pushing until he fell. This meant I had to think as he did, fall into his plan, think ahead—then trap him. Set a thief to catch a thief. A great theory, only I felt uncomfortably on the spot when I tried to put it into practice.

A drink helped, as did a cigar. Puffing on it, staring at the smooth bulkhead, relaxed me a bit. After all—there aren't that many things you can do with a battleship. You can't run a big con, blow safes or make burmedex with it. It is hell-on-jets for space piracy, but that's about all.

"Great, great—but why a battleship?"

I was talking to myself, normally a bad sign, but right now I didn't care. The mood of space piracy had seized me and I had been going along fine. Until this glaring inconsistency jumped out and hit me square in the eye.

Why a battleship? Why all the trouble and years of work to get a ship that two people could just barely manage? With a tenth of the effort Pepe could have had a cruiser that would have suited his purposes just as well.

Just as good for space piracy, that is—but not for *his* purposes. He had wanted a battleship, and he had gotten himself a battleship. Which meant he had more in mind than simple piracy. What? It was obvious that Pepe was a monomaniac, an egomaniac, and as psychotic as a shorted computer. Some day the mystery of how he had slipped through the screen of official testing would have to be investigated. That wasn't my concern now. He still had to be caught.

A plan was beginning to take shape in my head, but I didn't rush it. First I had to be sure that I knew him well. Any man that can con an entire world into building a battleship for him—then steal it from them—is not going to

stop there. The ship would need a crew, a base for refueling and a mission.

Fuel had been taken care of first, the gutted hull of *Ogget's Dream* was silent witness to that. There were countless planets that could be used as a base. Getting a crew would be more difficult in these peaceful times, although I could think of a few answers to that one, too. Raid the mental hospitals and jails. Do that often enough and you would have a crew that would make any pirate chief proud. Though piracy was, of course, too mean an ambition to ascribe to this boy. Did he want to rule a whole planet—or maybe an entire system? Or more? I shuddered a bit as the thought hit me. Was there really anything that could stop a plan like this once it got rolling? During the Kingly Wars any number of types with a couple of ships and less brains than Pepe had set up just this kind of empire. They were all pulled down in the end, since their success depended on one-man rule. But the price that had to be paid first!

This was the plan and I felt in my bones that I was right. I might be wrong on some of the minor details, they weren't important. I knew the general outline of the idea, just as when I bumped into a mark I knew how much he could be taken for, and just how to do it. There are natural laws in crime as in every other field of human endeavor. I *knew* this was it.

"Get the Communications Officer in here at once," I shouted at the intercom. "Also a couple of clerks with transcribers. And fast—this is a matter of life or death!" This last had a hollow ring, and I realized my enthusiasm had carried me out of character. I buttoned my collar, straightened my ribbons and squared my shoulders. By the time they knocked on the door I was all admiral again.

Acting on my orders the ship dropped out of warpdrive so our psiman could get through to the other operators. Captain Steng grumbled as we floated there with the engines silent, wasting precious days, while half his crew was involved in getting out what appeared to be insane instructions. My plan was beyond his understanding. Which is, of course, why he is a captain and I'm an admiral, even a temporary one.

Following my orders, the navigator again constructed a sphere of speculation in his tank. The surface of the sphere contacted all the star systems a days flight ahead of the maximum flight of the stolen battleship. There weren't too many of these at first and the psiman could handle them all, calling each in turn and sending by news releases to the Naval Public Relations officers there. As the sphere kept growing he started to drop behind, steadily losing ground. By this time I had a general release prepared, along with directions for use and follow up, which he sent to Central 14. The battery of psimen there contacted the individual planets and all we had to do was keep adding to the list of planets.

The release and follow-ups all harped on one theme. I expanded on it, waxed enthusiastic, condemned it, and worked it into an interview. I wrote as many variations as I could, so it could be slipped into as many different

formats as possible. In one form or another I wanted the basic information in every magazine, newspaper and journal inside that expanding sphere.

"What in the devil does this nonsense *mean*?" Captain Steng asked peevishly. He had long since given up the entire operation as a futile one, and spent most of the time in his cabin worrying about the affect of it on his service record. Boredom or curiosity had driven him out, and he was reading one of my releases with horror.

"Billionaire to found own world ... space yacht filled with luxuries to last a hundred years," the captain's face grew red as he flipped through the stack of notes. "What connection does this tripe have with catching those murderers?"

When we were alone he was anything but courteous to me, having assured himself by not-too-subtle questioning that I was a spurious admiral. There was no doubt I was still in charge, but our relationship was anything but formal.

"This tripe and nonsense," I told him, "is the bait that will snag our fish. A trap for Pepe and his partner in crime."

"Who is this mysterious billionaire?"

"Me," I said. "I've always wanted to be rich."

"But this ship, the space yacht, where is it?"

"Being built now in the naval shipyard at Udrydde. We're almost ready to go there now, soon as this batch of instructions goes out."

Captain Steng dropped the releases onto the table, then carefully wiped his hands off to remove any possible infection. He was trying to be fair and considerate of my views, and not succeeding in the slightest.

"It doesn't make sense," he growled. "How can you be sure this killer will ever read one of these things. And if he does—why should he be interested? It looks to me as if you are wasting time while he slips through your fingers. The alarm should be out and every ship notified. The Navy alerted and patrols set on all spacelanes—"

"Which he could easily avoid by going around, or better yet not even bother about, since he can lick any ship we have. That's not the answer," I told him. "This Pepe is smart and as tricky as a fixed gambling machine. That's his strength—and his weakness as well. Characters like that never think it possible for someone else to outthink them. Which is what *I'm* going to do."

"Modest, aren't you," Steng said.

"I try not to be," I told him. "False modesty is the refuge of the incompetent. I'm going to catch this thug and I'll tell you how I'll do it. He's going to hit again soon, and wherever he hits there will be some kind of a periodical with my plant in it. Whatever else he is after, he is going to take all of the magazines and papers he can find. Partly to satisfy his own ego, but mostly to keep track of the things he is interested in. Such as ship sailings."

"You're just guessing—you don't know all this."

His automatic assumption of my incompetence was beginning to get me annoyed. I bridled my temper and tried one last time.

"Yes, I'm guessing—an informed guess—but I do know some facts as well.

Opget's Dream was cleaned out of all reading matter, that was one of the first things I checked. We can't stop the battleship from attacking again, but we can see to it that the time after that she sails into a trap."

"I don't know," the captain said, "it sounds to me like...."

I never heard what it sounded like, which is all right since he was getting under my skin and might have been tempted to pull my pseudo-rank. The alarm sirens cut his sentence off and we foot-raced to the communications room.

Captain Steng won by a nose, it was his ship and he knew all the shortcuts. The psiman was holding out a transcription, but he summed it up in one sentence. He looked at me while he talked and his face was hard and cold.

"They hit again, knocked out a Navy supply satellite, thirty-four men dead."

"If your plan doesn't work, *admiral*," the captain whispered hoarsely in my ear, "I'll personally see that you're flayed alive!"

"If my plan doesn't work, *captain*—there won't be enough of my skin left to pick up with a tweezer. Now if you please, I'd like to get to Udrydde and pick up my ship as soon as possible."

The easy-going hatred and contempt of all my associates had annoyed me, thrown me off balance. I was thinking with anger now, not with logic. Forcing a bit of control, I ordered my thoughts, checking off a mental list.

"Belay that last command," I shouted, getting back into my old space-dog mood. "Get a call through first and find out if any of our plants were picked up during the raid."

While the psiman unfocused his eyes and mumbled under his breath I riffled some papers, relaxed and cool. The ratings and officers waited tensely, and made some slight attempt to conceal their hatred of me. It took about ten minutes to get an answer.

"Affirmative," the psiman said. "A store ship docked there twenty hours before the attack. Among other things, it left newspapers containing the article."

"Very good," I said calmly. "Send a general order to suspend all future activity with the planted releases. Send it by psimen only, no mention on any other Naval signaling equipment, there's a good chance now it might be 'overheard'."

I strolled out slowly, in command of the situation. Keeping my face turned away so they couldn't see the cold sweat.

It was a fast run to Udrydde where my billionaire's yacht, the *Eldorado*, was waiting. The dockyard commander showed me the ship, and made a noble effort to control his curiosity. I took a sadistic revenge on the Navy by not telling him a word about my mission. After checking out the controls and special apparatus with the technicians, I cleared the ship. There was a tape in the automatic navigator that would put me on the course mentioned in all the articles, just a press of a button and I would be on my way. I pressed the button.

It was a beautiful ship, and the dockyard had been lavish with their attention to detail. From bow to rear tubes she was plated in pure gold. There are other metals with a higher albedo, but none that give a richer effect. All the fittings, inside and out, were either machine-turned or plated. All this work could not have been done in the time allotted, the Navy must have adapted a luxury yacht to my needs.

Everything was ready. Either Pepe would make his move—or I would sail on to my billionaire's paradise planet. If that happened, it would be best if I stayed there.

Now that I was in space, past the point of no return, all the doubts that I had dismissed fought for attention. The plan that had seemed so clear and logical now began to look like a patched and crazy makeshift.

"Hold on there, sailor," I said to myself. Using my best admiral's voice. "Nothing has changed. It's still the best and *only* plan possible under the circumstances."

Was it? Could I be sure that Pepe, flying his mountain of a ship and eating Navy rations, would be interested in some of the comforts and luxuries of life? Or if the luxuries didn't catch his eye, would he be interested in the planetary homesteading gear? I had loaded the cards with all the things he might want, and planted the information where he could get it. He had the bait now—but would he grab the hook?

I couldn't tell. And I could work myself into a neurotic state if I kept running through the worry cycle. It took an effort to concentrate on anything else, but it had to be made. The next four days passed very slowly.

When the alarm blew off, all I felt was an intense sensation of relief. I might be dead and blasted to dust in the next few minutes, but that didn't seem to make much difference.

Pepe had swallowed the bait. There was only one ship in the galaxy that could knock back a blip that big at such a distance. It was closing fast, using the raw energy of the battleship engines for a headlong approach. My ship bucked a bit as the tug-beams locked on at maximum distance. The radio bleeped at me for attention at the same time. I waited as long as I dared, then flipped it on. The voice boomed out.

"... That you are under the guns of a warship! Don't attempt to run, signal, take evasive action, or in any other way...."

"Who are you—and what the devil do you want?" I spluttered into the mike. I had my scanner on, so they could see me, but my own screen stayed dark. They weren't sending any picture. In a way it made my act easier, I just played to an unseen audience. They could see the rich cut of my clothes, the luxurious cabin behind me. Of course they couldn't see my hands.

"It doesn't matter who we are," the radio boomed again. "Just obey orders if you care to live. Stay away from the controls until we have tied on, then do exactly as I say."

There were two distant clangs as magnetic grapples hit the hull. A little

later the ship lurched, drawn home against the battleship. I let my eyes roll in fear, looking around for a way to escape—and taking a peek at the outside scanners. The yacht was flush against the space-filling bulk of the other ship. I pressed the button that sent the torch-wielding robot on his way.

"Now let me tell you something," I snapped into the mike, wiping away the worried billionaire expression. "First I'll repeat your own warning—obey orders if you want to live. I'll show you why——"

When I threw the big switch a carefully worked out sequence took place. First, of course, the hull was magnetized and the bombs fused. A light blinked as the scanner in the cabin turned off, and the one in the generator room came on. I checked the monitor screen to make sure, then started into the spacesuit. It had to be done fast, at the same time it was necessary to talk naturally. They must still think of me as sitting in the control room.



"That's the ship's generators you're looking at," I said. "Ninety-eight per cent of their output is now feeding into coils that make an electromagnet of this ship's hull. You will find it very hard to separate us. And I would advise you not to try."

The suit was on, and I kept the running chatter up through the mike in the helmet, relaying to the ship's transmitter. The scene in the monitor receiver changed.

"You are now looking at a hydrogen bomb that is primed and aware of the magnetic field holding our ships together. It will, of course, go off if you try to pull away."

I grabbed up the monitor receiver and ran towards the air lock.

"This is a different bomb now," I said, keeping one eye on the screen and the other on the slowly opening outer door. "This one has receptors on the hull. Attempt to destroy any part of this ship, or even gain entry to it, and this one will detonate."

I was in space now, leaping across to the gigantic wall of the other ship.

"What do you want?" These were the first words Pepe had spoken since his first threats.

"I want to talk to you, arrange a deal. Something that would be profitable for both of us. But let me first show you the rest of the bombs, so you won't get any strange ideas about cooperating."

Of course I *had* to show him the rest of the bombs, there was no getting out of it. The scanners in the ship were following a planned program. I made light talk about all my massive armament that would carry us both to perdition, while I climbed through the hole in the battleship's hull. There was no armor or warning devices at this spot, it had been chosen carefully from the blueprints.

"Yeah, yeah ... I take your word for it, you're a flying bomb. So stop with this roving reporter bit and tell me what you have in mind."

This time I didn't answer him, because I was running and panting like a dog, and had the mike turned off. Just ahead, if the blueprints were right, was the door to the control room. Pepe should be there.

I stepped through, gun out, and pointed it at the back of his head. Angelina stood next to him, looking at the screen.

"The game's over," I said. "Stand up slowly and keep your hands in sight."

"What do you mean," he said angrily, looking at the screen in front of him. The girl caught wise first. She spun around and pointed.

"He's *here*!"

They both stared, gaped at me, caught off guard and completely unprepared.

"You're under arrest, crime-king," I told him. "And your girl friend."

Angelina rolled her eyes up and slid slowly to the floor. Real or faked, I didn't care. I kept the gun on Pepe's pudgy form while he picked her up and carried her to an acceleration couch against the wall.

"What ... what will happen now?" He quavered the question. His pouchy jaws shook and I swear there were tears in his eyes. I was not impressed by his acting since I could clearly remember the dead men floating in space. He stumbled over to a chair, half dropping into it.

"Will they do anything to me?" Angelina asked. Her eyes were open now.

"I have no idea of what will happen to you," I told her truthfully. "That is up to the courts to decide."

"But he *made* me do all those things," she wailed. She was young, dark and beautiful, the tears did nothing to spoil this.

Pepe dropped his face into his hands and his shoulders shook. I flicked the gun his way and snapped at him.

"Sit up, Pepe. I find it very hard to believe that you are crying. There are some Naval ships on the way now, the automatic alarm was triggered about a minute ago. I'm sure they'll be glad to see the man who...."

"Don't let them take me, please!" Angelina was on her feet now, her back pressed to the wall. "They'll put me in prison, do things to my mind!" She shrunk away as she spoke, stumbling along the wall. I looked back at Pepe, not wanting to have my eyes off him for an instant.

"There's nothing I can do," I told her. I glanced her way and a small door was swinging open and she was gone.

"Don't try to run," I shouted after her, "it can't do any good!"

Pepe made a strangling noise and I looked back to him quickly. He was sitting up now and his face was dry of tears. In fact he was laughing, not crying.

"So she caught you, too, Mr. Wise-cop, poor little Angelina with the soft eyes." He broke down again, shaking with laughter.

"What do you mean," I growled.

"Don't you catch yet? The story she told you was true—except she twisted it around a bit. The whole plan, building the battleship, then stealing it, was *hers*. She pulled me into it, played me like an accordion. I fell in love with her, hating myself and happy at the same time. Well—I'm glad now it's over. At least I gave her a chance to get away, I owe her that much. Though I thought I would explode when she went into that innocence act!"

The cold feeling was now a ball of ice that threatened to paralyze me. "You're lying," I said hoarsely, and even I didn't believe it.

"Sorry. That's the way it is. Your brain-boys will pick my skull to pieces and find out the truth anyway. There's no point in lying now."

"We'll search the ship, she can't hide for long."

"She won't have to," Pepe said. "There's a fast scout we picked up, stowed in one of the holds. That must be it leaving now." We could feel the vibration, distantly through the floor.

"The Navy will get her," I told him, with far more conviction than I felt.

"Maybe," he said, suddenly slumped and tired, no longer laughing. "Maybe they will. But I gave her her chance. It is all over for me now, but she knows that I loved her to the end." He bared his teeth in sudden pain. "Not that she will care in the slightest."

I kept the gun on him and neither of us moved while the Navy ships pulled up and their boots stamped outside. I had captured my battleship and the raids were over. And I couldn't be blamed if the girl had slipped away. If she evaded the Navy ships, that was their fault, not mine.

I had my victory all right.

Then why did it taste like ashes in my mouth?

It's a big galaxy, but it wasn't going to be big enough to hide Angelina now. I can be conned once—but only once. The next time we met things were going to be *very* different.

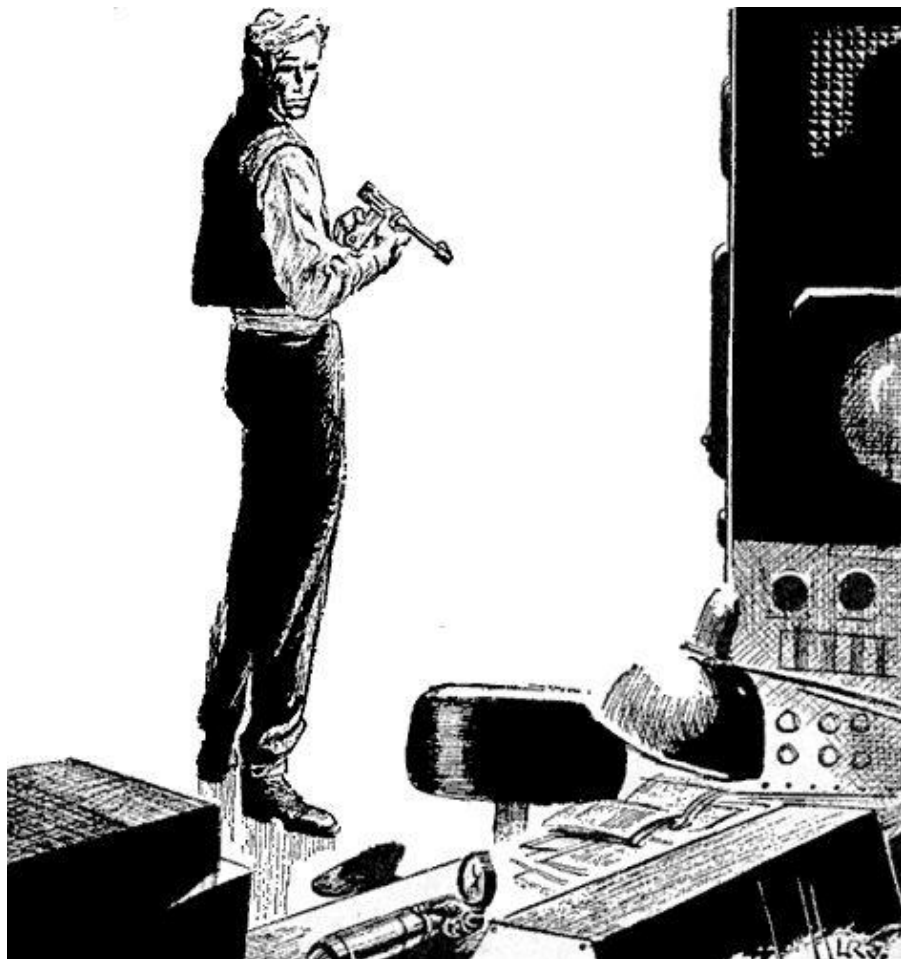
THE END

The K-Factor

Illustrated by Summers

Speed never hurt anybody—it's the sudden stop at the end. It's not how much change that signals danger, but how fast it's changing....

Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from *Analog* December 1960. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed. Minor spelling and typographical errors have been corrected without note.



WE'RE losing a planet, Neel. I'm afraid that I can't ... understand it."

The bald and wrinkled head wobbled a bit on the thin neck, and his eyes were moist. Abravanel was a very old man. Looking at him, Neel realized for the first time just how old and close to death he was. It was a profoundly shocking thought.

"Pardon me, sir," Neel broke in, "but is it possible? To lose a planet, I mean. If the readings are done correctly, and the k-factor equations worked to the tenth decimal place, then it's really just a matter of adjustment, making the indicated corrections. After all, Societics is an exact science—"

"Exact? *Exact!* Of course it's not! Have I taught you so little that you dare say that to me?" Anger animated the old man, driving the shadow of death back a step or two.

Neel hesitated, feeling his hands quiver ever so slightly, groping for the right words. Societics was his faith, and his teacher, Abravanel, its only prophet. This man before him, carefully preserved by the age-retarding drugs, was unique in the galaxy. A living anachronism, a refugee from the history books. Abravanel had singlehandedly worked out the equations, spelled out

his science of Societics. Then he had trained seven generations of students in its fundamentals. Hearing the article of his faith defamed by its creator produced a negative feedback loop in Neel so strong his hands vibrated in tune with it. It took a jarring effort to crack out of the cycle.

"The laws that control Societics, as postulated by ... you, are as exact as any others in the unified-field theory universe."

"No they're not. And, if any man I taught believes that nonsense, I'm retiring tomorrow and dropping dead the day after. My science—and it is really not logical to call it a science—is based on observation, experimentation, control groups and corrected observations. And though we have made observations in the millions, we are dealing in units in the billions, and the interactions of these units are multiples of that. And let us never forget that our units are people who, when they operate as individuals, do so in a completely different manner. So you cannot truthfully call my theories exact. They fit the facts well enough and produce results in practice, that has been empirically proven. So far. Some day, I am sure, we will run across a culture that doesn't fit my rules. At that time the rules will have to be revised. We may have that situation now on Himmel. There's trouble cooking there."

"They have always had a high activity count, sir," Neel put in hopefully.

"High yes, but *always* negative. Until now. Now it is slightly positive and nothing we can do seems to change it. That's why I've called you in. I want you to run a new basic survey, ignoring the old one still in operation, to re-examine the check points on our graphs. The trouble may lie there."

Neel thought before he answered, picking his words carefully. "Wouldn't that be a little ... unethical, sir? After all Hengly, who is operator there now, is a friend of mine. Going behind his back, you know."

"I know nothing of the sort." Abravanel snorted. "We are not playing for poker chips, or seeing who can get a paper published first. Have you forgotten what Societics is?"

Neel answered by rote. "The applied study of the interaction of individuals in a culture, the interaction of the group generated by these individuals, the equations derived therefrom, and the application of these equations to control one or more factors of this same culture."

"And what is the one factor that we have tried to control in order to make all the other factors possible of existence?"

"War." Neel said, in a very small voice.

"Very good then, there is no doubt what it is we are talking about. You are going to land quietly on Himmel, do a survey as quickly as possible and transmit the data back here. There is no cause to think of it as sneaking behind Hengly's back, but as doing something to help him set the matter right. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," Neel said firmly this time, straightening his back and letting his right hand rest reassuringly on the computer slung from his belt.

"Excellent. Then it is now time to meet your assistant." Abravanel touched

a button on his desk.

It was an unexpected development and Neel waited with interest as the door opened. But he turned away abruptly, his eyes slitted and his face white with anger. Abravanel introduced them.

"Neel Sidorak, this is—"

"Costa. I know him. He was in my class for six months." There wasn't the slightest touch of friendliness in Neel's voice now. Abravanel either ignored it or didn't hear it. He went on as if the two cold, distant young men were the best of friends.

"Classmates. Very good—then there is no need to make introductions. Though it might be best to make clear your separate areas of control. This is your project Neel, and Adao Costa will be your assistant, following your orders and doing whatever he can to help. You know he isn't a graduate Societist, but he has done a lot of field work for us and can help you greatly in that. And, of course, he will be acting as an observer for the UN, and making his own reports in this connection."

Neel's anger was hot and apparent. "So he's a UN observer now. I wonder if he still holds his old job at the same time. I think it only fair, sir, that you know. He works for Interpol."

Abravanel's ancient and weary eyes looked at both men, and he sighed. "Wait outside Costa," he said, "Neel will be with you in a minute."

Costa left without a word and Abravanel waved Neel back to his chair. "Listen to me now," he said, "and stop playing tunes on that infernal buzzer." Neel snapped his hand away from the belt computer, as if it had suddenly grown hot. A hesitant finger reached out to clear the figures he had nervously been setting up, then thought better of it. Abravanel sucked life into his ancient pipe and squinted at the younger man.

"Listen," he said. "You have led a very sheltered life here at the university, and that is probably my fault. No, don't look angry, I don't mean about girls. In that matter undergraduates have been the same for centuries. I'm talking about people in groups, individuals, politics, and all the complicated mess that makes up human life. This has been your area of study and the program is carefully planned so you can study it secondhand. The important thing is to develop the abstract viewpoint, since any attempt to prejudge results can only mean disaster. And it has been proved many times that a man with a certain interest will make many unwitting errors to shape an observation or experiment in favor of his interest. No, we could have none of that here.

"We are following the proper study of mankind and we must do that by keeping personally on the outside, to preserve our perspective. When you understand that, you understand many small things about the university. Why we give only resident student scholarships at a young age, and why the out-of-the-way location here in the Dolomites. You will also see the reason why the campus bookstore stocks all of the books published, but never has an adequate supply of newspapers. The agreed policy has been to see that you all mature

with the long view. Then—hopefully—you will be immune to short-term political interests after you leave.

"This policy has worked well in turning out men with the correct attitude towards their work. It has also turned out a fair number of self-centered, egocentric horrors."

Neel flushed. "Do you mean that I—"

"No, I don't mean you. If I did, I would say so. Your worst fault—if you can call it a fault, since it is the very thing we have been trying to bring about—is that you have a very provincial attitude towards the universe. Now is the time to re-examine some of those ideas. Firstly, what do you think the attitude of the UN is towards Societics?"

There was no easy answer, Neel could see traps ready for anything he said. His words were hesitant. "I can't say I've really ever thought about it. I imagine the UN would be in favor of it, since we make their job of world government that much easier—"

"No such thing," Abravanel said, tempering the sharpness of his words with a smile. "To put it in the simplest language, they hate our guts. They wish I had never formulated Societics, and at the same time they are very glad I did. They are in the position of the man who caught the tiger by the tail. The man enjoys watching the tiger eat all of his enemies, but as each one is consumed his worry grows greater. What will happen when the last one is gone? Will the tiger then turn and eat him?"

"Well—we are the UN's tiger. Societics came along just at the time it was sorely needed. Earth had settled a number of planets, and governed them. First as outposts, then as colonies. The most advanced planets very quickly outgrew the colony stage and flexed their independent muscles. The UN had no particular desire to rule an empire, but at the same time they had to insure Earth's safety. I imagine they were considering all sorts of schemes—including outright military control—when they came to me.

"Even in its early, crude form, Societics provided a stopgap that would give them some breathing time. They saw to it that my work was well endowed and aided me—unofficially of course—in setting up the first control experiments on different planets. We had results, some very good, and the others not so bad that the local police couldn't get things back under control after a while. I was, of course, happy to perfect my theories in practice. After a hundred years I had all the rough spots evened down and we were in business. The UN has never come up with a workable alternative plan, so they have settled down to the uncomfortable business of holding the tiger's tail. They worry and spend vast sums of money keeping an eye on our work."

"But *why*?" Neel broke in.

"Why?" Abravanel gave a quick smile. "Thank you for fine character rating. I imagine it is inconceivable to you that I might want to be Emperor of the Universe. I could be, you know. The same forces that hold the lids on the planets could just as easily blow them off."

Neel was speechless at the awful enormity of the thought. Abravanel rose from behind his desk with an effort, and shambled over to lay a thin and feather-light arm on the younger man's shoulders. "Those are the facts of life my boy. And since we cannot escape them, we must live with them. Costa is just a man doing his duty. So try and put up with him. For my sake if not for your own."

"Of course," Neel agreed quickly. "The whole thing takes a bit of getting used to, but I think I can manage. We'll do as good a job on Himmel as it is possible to do. Don't worry about me, sir."

Costa was waiting in the next room, puffing quietly on a long cigarette. They left together, walking down the hall in silence. Neel glanced sideways at the wiry, dark-skinned Brazilian and wondered what he could say to smooth things out. He still had his reservations about Costa, but he'd keep them to himself now. Abravanel had ordered peace between them, and what the old man said was the law.

It was Costa who spoke first. "Can you brief me on Himmel—what we'll find there, and be expected to do?"

"Run the basic survey first, of course," Neel told him. "Chances are that that will be enough to straighten things out. Since the completion last year of the refining equations of Debir's Postulate, all sigma-110 and alpha-142 graph points are suspect—"

"Just stop there please, and run the flag back down the pole." Costa interrupted. "I had a six-months survey of Societics seven years ago, to give me a general idea of the field. I've worked with survey teams since then, but I have only the vaguest idea of the application of the information we got. Could you cover the ground again—only a bit slower?"

Neel controlled his anger successfully and started again, in his best classroom manner.

"Well, I'm sure you realize that a good survey is half the problem. It must be impartial and exact. If it is accurately done, application of the k-factor equations is almost mechanical."

"You've lost me again. Everyone always talks about the k-factor, but no one has ever explained just what it is."

Neel was warming to his topic now. "It's a term borrowed from nucleonics, and best understood in that context. Look, you know how an atomic pile works—essentially just like an atomic bomb. The difference is just a matter of degree and control. In both of them you have neutrons tearing around, some of them hitting nuclei and starting new neutrons going. These in turn hit and start others. This goes on faster and faster and *bam*, a few milliseconds later you have an atomic bomb. This is what happens if you don't attempt to control the reaction.

"However, if you have something like heavy water or graphite that will slow down neutrons and an absorber like cadmium, you can alter the speed of the reaction. Too much damping material will absorb too many neutrons and

the reaction will stop. Not enough and the reaction will build up to an explosion. Neither of these extremes is wanted in an atomic pile. What is needed is a happy balance where you are soaking up just as many neutrons as are being generated all the time. This will give you a constant temperature inside the reactor. The net neutron reproduction constant is then 1. This balance of neutron generation and absorption is the k-factor of the reactor. Ideally 1.0000000.

"That's the ideal, though, the impossible to attain in a dynamic system like a reactor. All you need is a few more neutrons around, giving you a k-factor of 1.00000001 and you are headed for trouble. Each extra neutron produces two and your production rate soars geometrically towards bang. On the other hand, a k-factor of 0.999999999 is just as bad. Your reaction is spiraling down in the other direction. To control a pile you watch your k-factor and make constant adjustments."

"All this I follow," Costa said, "but where's the connection with Societics?"

"We'll get to that—just as soon as you realize and admit that a minute difference of degree can produce a marked difference of kind. You might say that a single, impossibly tiny, neutron is the difference between an atom bomb and a slowly cooling pile of inert uranium isotopes. Does that make sense?"

"I'm staggering, but still with you."

"Good. Then try to go along with the analogy that a human society is like an atomic pile. At one extreme you will have a dying, decadent culture—the remains of a highly mechanized society—living off its capital, using up resources it can't replace because of a lost technology. When the last machine breaks and the final food synthesizer collapses the people will die. This is the cooled down atomic pile. At the other extreme is complete and violent anarchy. Every man thinking only of himself, killing and destroying anything that gets in his way—the atomic explosion. Midway between the two is a vital, active, producing society.

"This is a generalization—and you must look at it that way. In reality society is infinitely complex, and the ramifications and possibilities are endless. It can do a lot more things than fizzle or go boom. Pressure of population, war or persecution patterns can cause waves of immigration. Plant and animal species can be wiped out by momentary needs or fashions. Remember the fate of the passenger pigeon and the American bison.

"All the pressures, cross-relationships, hungers, needs, hatreds, desires of people are reflected in their interrelationships. One man standing by himself tells us nothing. But as soon as he says something, passes on information in an altered form, or merely expresses an attitude—he becomes a reference point. He can be marked, measured and entered on a graph. His actions can be grouped with others and the action of the group measured. Man—and his society—then becomes a systems problem that can be fed into a computer. We've cut the Gordian knot of the three-L's and are on our way towards a solution."

"Stop!" Costa said, raising his hand. "I was with you as far as the 3L's. What are they? A private code?"

"Not a code—abbreviation. Linear Logic Language, the pitfall of all the old researchers. All of them, historians, sociologists, political analysts, anthropologists, were licked before they started. They had to know all about A and B before they could find C. Facts to them were always hooked up in a series. Whereas in truth they had to be analyzed as a complex circuit complete with elements like positive and negative feedback, and crossover switching. With the whole thing being stirred up constantly by continual homeostasis correction. It's little wonder they did do badly."

"You can't really say that," Adao Costa protested. "I'll admit that Societics has carried the art tremendously far ahead. But there were many basics that had already been discovered."



"If you are postulating a linear progression from the old social sciences—forget it," Neel said. "There is the same relationship here that alchemy holds to physics. The old boys with their frog guts and awful offal knew a bit about things like distilling and smelting. But there was no real order to their knowledge, and it was all an unconsidered by-product of their single goal, the whole nonsense of transmutation."

They passed a lounge, and Adao waved Neel in after him, dropping into a chair. He rummaged through his pockets for a cigarette, organizing his thoughts. "I'm still with you," he said. "But how do we work this back to the

k-factor?"

"Simple," Neel told him. "Once you've gotten rid of the 3L's and their false conclusions. Remember that politics in the old days was all We are angels and They are devils. This was literally believed. In the history of mankind there has yet to be a war that wasn't backed by the official clergy on each side. And each declared that God was on their side. Which leaves You Know Who as prime supporter of the enemy. This theory is no more valid than the one that a single man can lead a country into war, followed by the inference that a well-timed assassination can save the peace."

"That doesn't sound too unreasonable," Costa said.

"Of course not. All of the old ideas sound good. They have a simple-minded simplicity that anyone can understand. That doesn't make them true. Kill a war-minded dictator and nothing changes. The violence-orientated society, the factors that produced it, the military party that represents it—none of these are changed. The k-factor remains the same."

"There's that word again. Do I get a definition yet?"

Neel smiled. "Of course. The k-factor is one of the many factors that interrelate in a society. Abstractly it is no more important than the other odd thousand we work with. But in practice it is the only one we try to alter."

"The k-factor is the war factor," Adao Costa said. All the humor was gone now.

"That's a good enough name for it," Neel said, grinding out his half-smoked cigarette. "If a society has a positive k-factor, even a slight one that stays positive, then you are going to have a war. Our planetary operators have two jobs. First to gather and interpret data. Secondly to keep the k-factor negative."

They were both on their feet now, moved by the same emotion.

"And Himmel has a positive one that stays positive," Costa said. Neel Sidorak nodded agreement. "Then let's get into the ship and get going," he said.

It was a fast trip and a faster landing. The UN cruiser cut its engines and dropped like a rock in free fall. Night rain washed the ports and the computer cut in the maximum permissible blast for the minimum time that would reduce their speed to zero at zero altitude. Deceleration sat on their chests and squeezed their bones to rubber. Something crunched heavily under their stern at the exact instant the drive cut out. Costa was unbelted and out the door while Neel was still feeling his insides shiver back into shape.

The unloading had an organized rhythm that rejected Neel. He finally realized he could help best by standing back out of the way while the crewmen grav-lifted the heavy cases out through the cargo port, into the blackness of the rain-lashed woods. Adao Costa supervised this and seemed to know what he was doing. A signal rating wearing earphones stood to one side of the lock chanting numbers that sounded like detector fixes. There was apparently enough time to unload everything—but none to spare. Things got

close towards the end.

Neel was suddenly hustled out into the rain and the last two crates were literally thrown out after him. He plowed through the mud to the edge of the clearing and had just enough time to cover his face before the takeoff blast burst out like a new sun.

"Sit down and relax," Costa told him. "Everything is in the green so far. The ship wasn't spotted on the way down. Now all we have to do is wait for transportation."

In theory at least, Adao Costa was Neel's assistant. In practice he took complete charge of moving their equipment and getting it under cover in the capital city of Kitez. Men and trucks appeared to help them, and vanished as soon as their work was done. Within twenty hours they were installed in a large loft, all of the machines uncrated and plugged in. Neel took a no-sleep and began tuning checks on all the circuits, glad of something to do. Costa locked the heavy door behind their last silent helper, then dropped gratefully onto one of the bedding rolls.

"How did the gadgets hold up?" he asked.

"I'm finding out now. They're built to take punishment—but being dropped twelve feet into mud soup, then getting baked by rockets isn't in the original specs."

"They crate things well these days," Costa said unworriedly, sucking on a bottle of the famous Himmelian beer. "When do you go to work?"

"We're working right now," Neel told him, pulling a folder of papers out of the file. "Before we left I drew up a list of current magazines and newspapers I would need. You can start on these. I'll have a sampling program planned by the time you get back."

Costa groaned hollowly and reached for the papers.

Once the survey was in operation it went ahead of its own momentum. Both men grabbed what food and sleep they could. The computers gulped down Neel's figures and spat out tape-reels of answers that demanded even more facts. Costa and his unseen helpers were kept busy supplying the material.

Only one thing broke the ordered labors of the week. Neel blinked twice at Costa before his equation-fogged brain assimilated an immediate and personal factor.

"You've a bandage on your head," he said. "A *bloodstained* bandage!"

"A little trouble in the streets. Mobs. And that's an incredible feat of observation," Costa marveled. "I had the feeling that if I came in here stark naked, you wouldn't notice it."

"I ... I get involved," Neel said. Dropping the papers on a table and kneading the tired furrow between his eyes. "Get wrapped up in the computation. Sorry. I tend to forget about people."

"Don't feel sorry to me," Costa said. "You're right. Doing the job. I'm supposed to help you, not pose for the *before* picture in Home Hospital ads. Anyway—how are we doing? Is there going to be a war? Certainly seems like

one brewing outside. I've seen two people lynched who were only suspected of being Earthies."

"Looks don't mean a thing," Neel said, opening two beers. "Remember the analogy of the pile. It boils liquid metal and cooks out energy from the infrared right through to hard radiation. Yet it keeps on generating power at a nice, steady rate. But your A-bomb at zero minus one second looks as harmless as a fallen log. It's the k-factor that counts, not surface appearance. This planet may look like a dictator's dream of glory, but as long as we're reading in the negative things are fine."

"And how are things? How's our little k-factor?"

"Coming out soon," Neel said, pointing at the humming computer. "Can't tell about it yet. You never can until the computation is complete. There's a temptation to try and guess from the first figures, but they're meaningless. Like trying to predict the winner of a horse race by looking at the starters lined up at the gate."

"Lots of people think they can."

"Let them. There are few enough pleasures in this life without taking away all delusions."

Behind them the computer thunked and was suddenly still.

"This is it," Neel said, and pulled out the tape. He ran it quickly through his fingers, mumbling under his breath. Just once he stopped and set some figures into his hand computer. The result flashed in the window and he stared at it, unmoving.

"Good? Bad? What is it?"

Neel raised his head and his eyes were ten years older.

"Positive. Bad. Much worse than it was when we left Earth."

"How much time do we have?"

"Don't know for certain," Neel shrugged. "I can set it up and get an approximation. But there is no definite point on the scale where war *has* to break out. Just a going and going until, somewhere along the line—"

"I know. Gone." Costa said, reaching for his gun. He slid it into his side pocket. "Now it's time to stop looking and start doing. What do I do?"

"Going to kill War Marshal Lommeord?" Neel asked distastefully. "I thought we had settled that you can't stop a war by assassinating the top man."

"We also settled that *something* can be done to change the k-factor. The gun is for my own protection. While you're radioing results back to Earth and they're feeling bad about it, I'm going to be doing something. Now *you* tell me what that something is."

This was a different man from the relaxed and quietly efficient Adao Costa of the past week. All of his muscles were hard with the restrained energy of an animal crouching to leap. The gun, ready in his pocket, had a suddenly new significance. Neel looked away, reaching around for words. This was all very alien to him and suddenly a little frightening. It was one thing to work out a k-problem in class, and discuss the theory of correction.

It was something entirely different to direct the operation.

"Well?" Costa's voice knifed through his thoughts.

"You can ... well ... it's possible to change one of the peak population curves. Isolate individuals and groups, then effect status and location changes —"

"You mean get a lot of guys to take jobs in other towns through the commercial agents?"

Neel nodded.

"Too slow." Costa withered the idea with his voice. "Fine in the long run, but of absolutely no value in an emergency." He began to pace back and forth. Too quickly. It was more of a bubbling-over than a relaxation. "Can't you isolate some recent key events that can be reversed?"

"It's possible." Neel thought about it, quickly. "It wouldn't be a final answer, just a delaying action."

"That's good enough. Tell me what to do."

Neel flipped through his books of notes, checking off the Beta-13's. These were the reinforcers, the individuals and groups who were k-factor amplifiers. It was a long list which he cut down quickly by crossing off the low increment additions and multiple groups. Even while the list was incomplete, Neel began to notice a pattern. It was an unlikely one, but it was there. He isolated the motivator and did a frequency check. Then sat back and whistled softly.

"We have a powerhouse here," he said, flipping the paper across the table. "Take this organization out of the equations and you might even knock us negative."

"Society for the Protection of the Native Born," Costa read. "Doesn't sound like very important. Who or what are they?"

"Proof positive of the law of averages. It's possible to be dealt a royal flush in a hand of cards, but it isn't very common. It's just as possible for a bunch of simpletons to set up an organization for one purpose, and have it turn out to be a supercharged, high-frequency k-factor amplifier. That's what's happened with this infernal S.P.N.B. A seedy little social club, dedicated to jingoists with low I.Q.'s. With the war scare they have managed to get hold of a few credits. They have probably been telling the same inflated stories for years about the discrimination against natives of this fair planet, but no one has really cared. Now they have a chance to get their news releases and faked pix out in quantity. Just at a time when the public is ripe for their brand of nonsense. Putting this bunch out of business will be a good day's work."

"Won't there be repercussions?" Costa asked. "If they are this important and throw so much weight around—won't it look suspicious if they are suddenly shut up. Like an obvious move by the enemy?"

"Not at all. That might be true if, for instance, you blew up the headquarters of the War Party. It would certainly be taken as an aggressive move. But no one really knows or cares about this Society of the Half-baked Native Born. There might be reaction and interest if attention was drawn to them. But if

some accident or act of nature were to put them out of business, that would be the end of it."

Costa was snapping his lighter on and off as he listened to Neel, staring at the flame. He closed it and held it up. "I believe in accidents. I believe that even in our fireproof age, fires still occur. Buildings still burn down. And if a burnt building just happened to be occupied by the S.P.N.B.—just one tenant of many—and their offices and records were destroyed; that would be of very little interest to anyone except the fire brigade."

"You're a born criminal," Neel told him. "I'm glad we're on the same side. That's your department and I leave it to you. I'll just listen for the news flashes. Meanwhile I have one little errand to take care of."

The words stopped Costa, who was almost out the door. He turned stiffly to look at Neel putting papers into an envelope. Yet Costa spoke naturally, letting none of his feelings through into his voice.

"Where are you going?"

"To see Hengly, the planetary operator here. Abravanel told me to stay away from him, to run an entirely new basic survey. Well we've done that now, and pinpointed some of the trouble areas as well. I can stop feeling guilty about poaching another man's territory and let him know what's going on."

"No. Stay away from Hengly," Costa said. "The last thing in the world we want to do, is to be seen near him. There's a chance that he ... well ... might be compromised."

"What do you mean!" Neel snapped. "Hengly's a friend of mine, a graduate —"

"He might also be surrounded ten deep by the secret police. Did you stop to think about *that*?"

Neel hadn't thought about it, and his anger vanished when he did. Costa drove the point home.

"Societics has been a well kept secret for over two centuries. It may still be a secret—or bits of it might have leaked out. And even if the Himmeliens know nothing about Societics, they have certainly heard of espionage. They know the UN has agents on their world, they might think Hengly is one of them. This is all speculation, of course, but we do have one fact—this Society of Native Boobs we turned up. *We* had no trouble finding them. If Hengly had reliable field men, he should know about them, too. The only reason he hasn't is because he isn't getting the information. Which means he's compromised."

Reaching back for a chair, Neel fell heavily into it. "You're right ... of course! I never realized."

"Good," Costa said. "We'll do something to help Hengly tomorrow, but this operation comes first. Sit tight. Get some rest. And don't open the door for anyone except me."

It had been a long job—and a tiring one—but it was almost over. Neel allowed himself the luxury of a long yawn, then shuffled over to the case of

rations they had brought. He stripped the seal from something optimistically labeled CHICKEN DINNER—it tasted just like the algae it had been made from—and boiled some coffee while it was heating.

And all the time he was doing these prosaic tasks his mind was turning an indigestible fact over and over. It wasn't a conscious process, but it was nevertheless going on. The automatic mechanism of his brain ran it back and forth like a half heard tune, searching for its name. Neel was tired, or he would have reacted sooner. The idea finally penetrated. One fact he had taken for granted was an obvious impossibility.

The coffee splashed to the floor as he jumped to his feet.

"It's wrong ... it *has* to be wrong!" he said aloud, grabbing up the papers. Computations and graphs dropped and were trampled into the spilled coffee. When he finally found the one he wanted his hands were shaking as he flipped through it. The synopsis of Hengly's reports for the past five years. The gradual rise and fall of the k-factor from month to month. There were no sharp breaks in the curve or gaps in the supporting equations.

Societics isn't an exact science. But it's exact enough to know when it is working with incomplete or false information. If Hengly had been kept in the dark about the S.P.N.B., he would also have been misinformed about other factors. This kind of alteration of survey would *have* to show in the equations.

It didn't.

Time was running out and Neel had to act. But what to do? He must warn Adao Costa. And the records here had to be protected. Or better yet destroyed. There was a power in these machines and charts that couldn't be allowed to fall into nationalist hands. But what could be done about it?

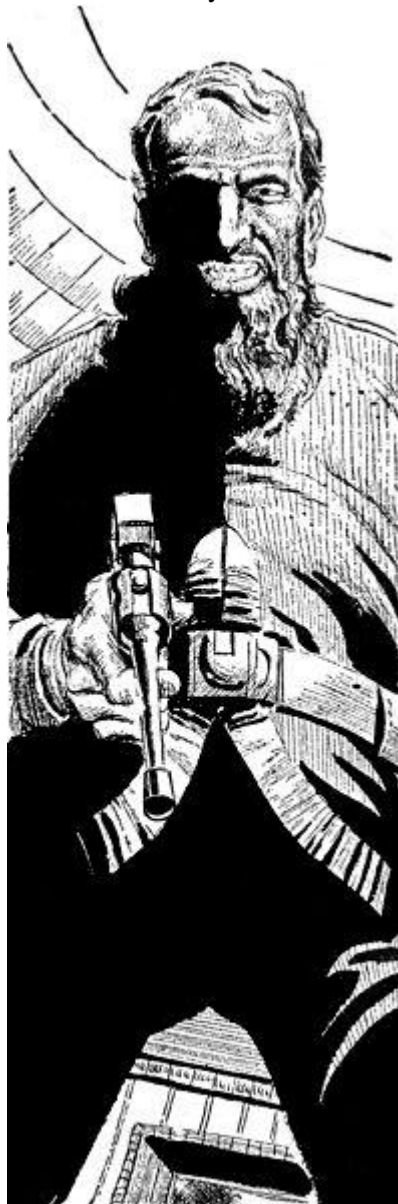
In all the welter of equipment and containers, there was one solid, heavy box that he had never opened. It belonged to Costa, and the UN man had never unlocked it in his presence. Neel looked at the heavy clasps on it and felt defeat. But when he pulled at the lid, wondering what to do next, it fell open. It hadn't been sealed. Costa wasn't the kind of man who did things by accident. He had looked forward to the time when Neel might need what was in this box, and had it ready.

Inside was just what Neel expected. Grenades, guns, some smoothly polished devices that held an aura of violence. Looking at them, Neel had an overwhelming sensation of defeat. His life was dedicated to peace and the furthering of peace. He hated the violence that seemed inborn in man, and detested all the hypocritical rationalizations, such as the ends justifying the means. All of his training and personal inclinations were against it.

And he reached down and removed the blunt, black gun.

There was one other thing he recognized in the compact arsenal—a time bomb. There had been lectures on this mechanism in school, since the fact was clearly recognized that a time might come when equipment had to be destroyed rather than fall into the wrong hands. He had never seen one since, but he had learned the lesson well. Neel pushed the open chest nearer to his

instruments and set the bomb dial for fifteen minutes. He slipped the gun into his pocket, started the fuse, and carefully locked the door when he left.



The bridges were burned. Now he had to find Adao Costa.

This entire operation was outside of his experience and knowledge. He could think of no plan that could possibly make things easier or safer. All he could do was head for the offices of the Society for the Protection of the Native Born and hope he could catch Adao before he ran into any trouble.

Two blocks away from the address he heard the sirens. Trying to act as natural as the other pedestrians, he turned to look as the armored cars and trucks hurtled by. Packed with armed police, their sirens and revolving lights

cleared a path through the dark streets. Neel kept walking, following the cars now.

The street he wanted to go into was cordoned off.

Showing more than a normal interest would have been a giveaway. He let himself be hurried past, with no more than a glance down the block, with the other pedestrians. Cars and men were clustered around a doorway that Neel felt sure was number 265, his destination. Something was very wrong.

Had Costa walked into a trap—or tripped an alarm? It didn't really matter which, either way the balloon had gone up. Neel walked on slowly, painfully aware of his own inadequacy in dealing with the situation. It was a time for action—but what action? He hadn't the slightest idea where Costa was or how he could be of help to him.

Halfway down the block there was a dark mouth of an alleyway—unguarded. Without stopping to think, Neel turned into it. It would bring him closer to the building. Perhaps Costa was still trapped in there. He could get in, help him.

The back of 265 was quiet, with no hint of the activity on the other side of the building. Neel had counted carefully and was sure he had the right one. It was completely dark in the unlit alley, but he found a recessed door by touch. The chances were it was locked, but he moved into the alcove and leaned his weight against it, pulling at the handle, just in case. Nothing moved.

An inch behind his back the alley filled with light, washed with it, eye burning and strong. His eyes snapped shut, but he forced them open again, blinking against the pain. There were searchlights at each end of the alley, sealing it off. He couldn't get out.

In the instant before the fear hit him he saw the blood spots on the ground. There were three of them, large and glistening redly wet. They extended in a straight line away from him, pointing towards the gaping entrance of a cellar.

When the lights went out, Neel dived headlong towards the cracked and filthy pavement. The darkness meant that the police were moving slowly towards him from both ends of the alley, trapping him in between. There was nothing doubtful about the fate of an armed Earthman caught here. He didn't care. Neel's fear wasn't gone—he just had not time to think about it. His long shot had paid off and there was still a chance he could get Costa out of the trap he had let him walk into.

The lights had burned an after-image into his retina. Before it faded he reached out and felt his fingers slide across the dusty ground into a patch of wetness. He scrubbed at it with his sleeve, soaking up the blood, wiping the spot fiercely. With his other hand he pushed together a pile of dust and dirt, spreading it over the stain. As soon as he was sure the stain was covered he slid forward, groping for the second telltale splash.

Time was his enemy and he had no way to measure it. He could have been lying in the rubble of that alley for an hour—or a second. What was to be done, had to be done at once without a sound. There were silent, deadly men

coming towards him through the darkness.

After the second smear was covered there was a drawn out moment of fear when he couldn't find the third and last. His fingers touched it finally, much farther on than he had expected. Time had certainly run out. Yet he forced himself to do as good a job here as he had with the other two. Only when it was dried and covered did he allow himself to slide forward into the cellar entrance.

Everything was going too fast. He had time for a single deep breath before the shriek of a whistle paralyzed him again. Footsteps slapped towards him and one of the searchlights burned with light. The footsteps speeded up and the man ran by, close enough for Neel to touch if he had reached out a hand. His clothing was shapeless and torn, his head and face thick with hair. That was all Neel had time to see before the guns roared and burned the life from the runner.

Some derelict, sleeping in the alley, who had paid with his life for being in the wrong spot at the wrong time. But his death had bought Neel a little more time. He turned and looked into the barrel of a gun.

Shock after shock had destroyed his capacity for fear. There was nothing left that could move him, even his own death. He looked quietly—dully—at the muzzle of the gun. With slow determination his mind turned over and he finally realized that this time there was nothing to fear.

"It's me, Adao," he whispered. "You'll be all right now."

"Ahh, it is you—" the voice came softly out of the darkness, the gun barrel wavered and sank. "Lift me up so I can get at this door. Can't seem to stand too well any more."

Neel reached down, found Costa's shoulders and slowly dragged him to his feet. His eyes were adjusting to the glare above them now, and he could make out the gleam of reflected light on the metal in Costa's fingers. The UN man's other hand was clutched tightly to his waist. The gun had vanished. The metal device wasn't a key, but Costa used it like one. It turned in the lock and the door swung open under their weight. Neel half carried, half dragged the other man's dead weight through it, dropping him to the floor inside. Before he closed the door he reached down and felt a great pool of blood outside.

There was no time to do a perfect job, the hard footsteps were coming, just a few yards away. His sleeves were sodden with blood as he blotted, then pushed rubble into the stain. He pulled back inside and the door closed with only the slightest click.

"I don't know how you managed it, but I'm glad you found me," Costa said. There was weakness as well as silence in his whisper.

"It was only chance I found you," Neel said bitterly. "But criminal stupidity on my part that let you walk into this trap."

"Don't worry about it, I knew what I was getting into. But I still had to go. Spring the trap to see if it *was* a trap."

"You suspected then that Hengly was—" Neel couldn't finish the sentence.

He knew what he wanted to say, but the idea was too unbearable to put into words. Costa had no such compunction.

"Yes. Dear Hengly, graduate of the University and Practitioner of Societics. A traitor. A warmonger, worse than any of his predecessors because he knew just what to sell and how to sell it. It's never happened before ... but there was always the chance ... the weight of responsibility was too much ... he gave in—" Costa's voice had died away almost to a whisper. Then it was suddenly loud again, no louder than normal speaking volume, but sounding like a shout in the secret basement.

"Neel!"

"It's all right. Take it easy—"

"Nothing is all right—don't you realize that. I've been sending my reports back, so the UN and your Societics people will know how to straighten this mess out. But Hengly can turn this world upside down and might even get a shooting-war going before they get here. I'm out of it, but I can tell you who to contact, people who'll help. Hold the k-factor down—"

"That wouldn't do any good," Neel said quietly. "The whole thing is past the patch and polish stage now. Besides—I blew the whole works up. My machines and records, your—"

"You're a fool!" For the first time there was pain in Costa's voice.

"No. I was before—but not any more. As long as I thought it was a normal problem I was being outguessed at every turn. You must understand the ramifications of Societics. To a good operator there is no interrelationship that cannot be uncovered. Hengly would be certain to keep his eyes open for another field check. Our kind of operation is very easy to spot if you know where—and how—to look. The act of getting information implies contact of some kind, that contact can be detected. He's had our location marked and has been sitting tight, buying time. But our time ran out when you showed them we were ready to fight back. That's why I destroyed our setup, and cut our trail."

"But ... then we're defenseless! What can we possibly do?"

Neel knew the answer, but he hesitated to put it into words. It would be final then. He suddenly realized he had forgotten about Costa's wound.

"I'm sorry ... I forgot about your being hurt. What can I do?"

"Nothing," Costa snapped. "I put a field dressing on, that'll do. Answer my question. What is there left? What can be done now?"

"I'll have to kill Hengly. That will set things right until the team gets here."

"But what good will that accomplish?" Costa asked, trying to see the other man in the darkness of the cellar. "You told me yourself that a war couldn't be averted by assassination. No one individual means that much."

"Only in a normal situation," Neel explained. "You must look at the power struggle between planets as a kind of celestial chess game. It has its own rules. When I talked about individuals earlier I was talking about pieces on this chessboard. What I'm proposing now is a little more dramatic. I'm going to

win the chess game in a slightly more unorthodox way. I'm going to shoot the other chess player."

There was silence for a long moment, broken only by the soft sigh of their breathing. Then Costa stirred and there was the sound of metal clinking slightly on the floor.

"It's really my job," Costa said, "but I'm no good for it. You're right, you'll have to go. But I can help you, plan it so you will be able to get to Hengly. You might even stand a better chance than me, because you are so obviously an amateur. Now listen carefully, because we haven't much time."

Neel didn't argue. He knew what needed doing, but Costa could tell him how best to go about it. The instructions were easy to memorize, and he put the weapons away as he was told.

"Once you're clear of this building, you'll have to get cleaned up," Costa said. "But that's the only thing you should stop for. Get to Hengly while he is still rattled, catch him off guard as much as possible. Then—after you finish with him—dig yourself in. Stay hidden at least three days before you try to make any contacts. Things should have quieted down a bit by then."

"I don't like leaving you here," Neel said.

"It's the best way, as well as being the only way. I'll be safe enough. I've a nice little puncture in me, but there's enough medication to see me through."

"If I'm going to hole up, I'll hole up here. I'll be back to take care of you."

Costa didn't answer him. There was nothing more to say. They shook hands in the darkness and Neel crawled away.

There was little difficulty in finding the front door of the building, but Neel hesitated before he opened it. Costa had been sure Neel could get away without being noticed, but he didn't feel so sure himself. There certainly would be plenty of police in the streets, even here. Only as he eased the door did he understand why Costa had been so positive about this.

Gunfire hammered somewhere behind him; other guns answered. Costa must have had another gun. He had planned it this way and the best thing Neel could do was not to think about it and go ahead with the plan. A car whined by in the roadway. As soon as it had passed Neel slipped out and crossed the empty street to the nearest monosub entrance. Most of the stations had valet machines.

It was less than an hour later when he reached Hengly's apartment. Washed, shaved—and with his clothes cleaned—Neel felt a little more sure of himself. No one had stopped him or even noticed him. The lobby had been empty and the automatic elevator left him off at the right floor when he gave it Hengly's name. Now, facing the featureless door, he had a sharp knife of fear. It was too easy. He reached out slowly and tried the handle. The door was unlocked. Taking a deep breath, he opened it and stepped inside.

It was a large room, but unlit. An open door at the other end had a dim light shining through it. Neel started that way and pain burst in his head, spinning him down, face forward.

He never quite lost consciousness, but details were vague in his memory. When full awareness returned he realized that the lights were on in the room. He was lying on his back, looking up at them. Two men stood next to him, staring down at him from above the perspective columns of their legs. One held a short metal bar that he kept slapping into his open palm.

The other man was Hengly.

"Not very friendly for an old classmate," he said, holding out Neel's gun. "Now get inside, I want to talk to you."

Neel rolled over painfully and crawled to his feet. His head throbbed with pain, but he tried to ignore it. As he stood up his hand brushed his ankle. The tiny gun Costa had given him was still in the top of his shoe. Perhaps Hengly wasn't being as smart as he should.

"I can take care of him," Hengly said to the man with the metal rod. "He's the only one left now, so you can get some sleep. See you early in the morning though." The man nodded agreement and left.

Slouched in the chair Neel looked forward to a certain pleasure in killing Hengly. Costa was dead, and this man was responsible for his death. It wouldn't even be like killing a friend, Hengly was very different from the man he had known. He had put on a lot of weight and affected a thick beard and flowing mustache. There was something jovial and paternal about him—until you looked into his eyes. Neel slumped forward, worn out, letting his fingers fall naturally next to the gun in his shoe. Hengly couldn't see his hand, the desk was in the way. All Neel had to do was draw and fire.

"You can pull out the gun," Hengly said with a grim smile, "but don't try to shoot it." He had his own gun now, aimed directly at Neel. Leaning forward he watched as Neel carefully pulled out the tiny weapon and threw it across the room. "That's better," he said, placing his own gun on the desk where he could reach it easily. "Now we can talk."

"There's nothing I have to say to you, Hengly." Neel leaned back in the chair, exhausted. "You're a traitor!"

Hengly hammered the desk in sudden anger and shouted. "Don't talk to me of treachery, my little man of peace. Creeping up with a gun to kill a friend. Is that peaceful? Where are the ethos of humanism now, you were very fond of them when we were in the University!"

Neel didn't want to listen to the words, he thought instead of how right Costa had been. He was dead, but this was still his operation. It was going according to plan.

"Walk right in there," Costa had said. "He won't kill you. Not at first, at least. He's the loneliest man in the universe, because he has given up one world for another that he hasn't gained yet. There will be no one he can confide in. He'll know you have come to kill him, but he won't be able to resist talking to you first. Particularly if you make it easy for him to defeat you. Not too easy—he must feel he is outthinking you. You'll have a gun for him to take away, but that will be too obvious. This small gun will be hidden

as well, and when he finds that, too, he should be taken off his guard. Not much, but enough for you to kill him. Don't wait. Do it at the first opportunity."

Out of the corner of his eye, Neel could see the radiophone clipped to the front of his jacket. It was slightly tarnished, looking like any one of ten thousand in daily use—almost a duplicate of the one Hengly wore. A universal symbol of the age, like the keys and small change in his pockets.

Only Neel's phone was a deadly weapon. Product of a research into sudden death that he had never been aware of before. All he had to do was get it near Hengly, the mechanism had been armed when he put it on. It had a range of two feet. As soon as it was that far from any part of his body it would be actuated.

"Can I ask you a question, Hengly?" His words cut loudly through the run of the other man's speech.

Hengly frowned at the interruption, then nodded permission. "Go ahead," he said. "What would you like to know?"

"The obvious. Why did you do it? Change sides I mean. Give up a positive work, for this ... this negative corruption...."

"That's how much you know about it." Hengly was shouting now. "Positive, negative. War, peace. Those are just words, and it took me years to find it out. What could be more positive than making something of my life—and of this planet at the same time. It's in my power to do it, and I've done it."

"Power, perhaps that's the key word," Neel said, suddenly very tired. "We have the stars now but we have carried with us our little personal lusts and emotions. There's nothing wrong with that, I suppose, as long as we keep them personal. It's when we start inflicting them on others the trouble starts. Well, it's over now. At least this time."

With a single, easy motion he unclipped the radiophone and flipped it across the desk towards Hengly.

"Good-by," he said.

The tiny mechanism clattered onto the desk and Hengly leaped back, shouting hoarsely. He pulled the gun up and tried to aim at the radiophone and at Neel at the same time. It was too late to do either. There was a brief humming noise from the phone.

Neel jerked in his chair. It felt as if a slight electric shock had passed through him. He had felt only a microscopic percentage of the radiation.

Hengly got it all. The actuated field of the device had scanned his nervous system, measured and tested it precisely. Then adjusted itself to the exact micro-frequency that carried the messages in his efferent nervous system. Once the adjustment had been made, the charged condensers had released their full blasts of energy on that frequency.

The results were horribly dramatic. Every efferent neuron in his system carried the message full power. Every muscle in his body responded with a contraction of full intensity.

Neel closed his eyes, covered them, turned away gasping. It couldn't be watched. An epileptic in a seizure can break the bones in a leg or arm by simultaneous contraction of opposing muscles. When all the opposed muscles of Hengly's body did this the results were horrible beyond imagining.

When Neel recovered a measure of sanity he was in the street, running. He slowed to a walk, and looked around. It was just dawn and the streets were empty. Ahead was the glowing entrance of a monotube and he headed for it. The danger was over now, as long as he was careful.

Pausing on the top step, he breathed the fresh air of the new morning. There was a sighing below as an early train pulled into the station. The dawn-lit sky was the color of blood.

"Blood," he said aloud. Then, "Do we have to keep on killing? Isn't there another way?"

He started guiltily as his voice echoed in the empty street, but no one had heard him.

Quickly, two at a time, he ran down the steps.

THE END

Planet of the Damned

Transcriber's note:

This etext was produced from the 1962 book publication of the story, which was originally published in *Analog Science Fact—Science Fiction*, Sept.-Nov. 1961. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the copyright on this publication was renewed.

EVIL

Brion entered the temple and stood as if rooted to the ground. There was a horror in this place—it clung to everything. Muffled and hooded men stood silent and unmoving about the room, their attention rigidly focused on a figure in the center. Brion wondered how he knew they were men—only their eyes showed, eyes completely empty of expression yet somehow reminding him of a bird of prey.

Then suddenly the figure in the center moved. It was a weird, crazily menacing action—and in an instant Brion knew he had found the enemy, the source of the evil that infected the **PLANET OF THE DAMNED**.

For my Mother and Father—

RIA AND LEO HARRISON

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I

A man said to the universe: "Sir, I exist!"

"However" replied the universe, "The fact has not created in me A sense of obligation."

STEPHEN CRANE

Sweat covered Brion's body, trickling into the tight loincloth that was the only garment he wore. The light fencing foil in his hand felt as heavy as a bar of lead to his exhausted muscles, worn out by a month of continual exercise. These things were of no importance. The cut on his chest, still dripping blood, the ache of his overstrained eyes—even the soaring arena around him with the thousands of spectators—were trivialities not worth thinking about. There was only one thing in his universe: the button-tipped length of shining steel that hovered before him, engaging his own weapon. He felt the quiver and scrape of its life, knew when it moved and moved himself to counteract it. And when he attacked, it was always there to beat him aside.

A sudden motion. He reacted—but his blade just met air. His instant of panic was followed by a small sharp blow high on his chest.

"*Touch!*" A world-shaking voice bellowed the word to a million waiting loudspeakers, and the applause of the audience echoed back in a wave of sound.

"One minute," a voice said, and the time buzzer sounded.

Brion had carefully conditioned the reflex in himself. A minute is not a very large measure of time and his body needed every fraction of it. The buzzer's whirr triggered his muscles into complete relaxation. Only his heart and lungs worked on at a strong, measured rate. His eyes closed and he was only distantly aware of his handlers catching him as he fell, carrying him to his bench. While they massaged his limp body and cleansed the wound, all of his attention was turned inward. He was in reverie, sliding along the borders of consciousness. The nagging memory of the previous night loomed up then, and he turned it over and over in his mind, examining it from all sides.

It was the very unexpectedness of the event that had been so unusual. The contestants in the Twenties needed undisturbed rest, therefore nights in the dormitories were as quiet as death. During the first few days, of course, the rule wasn't observed too closely. The men themselves were too keyed up and excited to rest easily. But as soon as the scores began to mount and eliminations cut into their ranks, there was complete silence after dark. Particularly so on this last night, when only two of the little cubicles were occupied, the thousands of others standing with dark, empty doors.

Angry words had dragged Brion from a deep and exhausted sleep. The words were whispered but clear—two voices, just outside the thin metal of his door. Someone spoke his name.

"... Brion Brandd. Of course not. Whoever said you could was making a big mistake and there is going to be trouble—"

"Don't talk like an idiot!" The other voice snapped with a harsh urgency,

clearly used to command. "I'm here because the matter is of utmost importance, and Brandd is the one I must see. Now stand aside!"

"The Twenties—"

"I don't give a damn about your games, hearty cheers and physical exercises. This is *important*, or I wouldn't be here!"

The other didn't speak—he was surely one of the officials—and Brion could sense his outraged anger. He must have drawn his gun, because the intruder said quickly, "Put that away. You're being a fool!"

"Out!" was the single snarled word of the response. There was silence then and, still wondering, Brion was once more asleep.

"Ten seconds."

The voice chopped away Brion's memories and he let awareness seep back into his body. He was unhappily conscious of his total exhaustion. The month of continuous mental and physical combat had taken its toll. It would be hard to stay on his feet, much less summon the strength and skill to fight and win a touch.

"How do we stand?" he asked the handler who was kneading his aching muscles.

"Four-four. All you need is a touch to win!"

"That's all he needs too," Brion grunted, opening his eyes to look at the wiry length of the man at the other end of the long mat. No one who had reached the finals in the Twenties could possibly be a weak opponent, but this one, Irolg, was the pick of the lot. A red-haired mountain of a man, with an apparently inexhaustible store of energy. That was really all that counted now. There could be little art in this last and final round of fencing. Just thrust and parry, and victory to the stronger.

Brion closed his eyes again and knew the moment he had been hoping to avoid had arrived.

Every man who entered the Twenties had his own training tricks. Brion had a few individual ones that had helped him so far. He was a moderately strong chess player, but he had moved to quick victory in the chess rounds by playing incredibly unorthodox games. This was no accident, but the result of years of work. He had a standing order with offplanet agents for archaic chess books, the older the better. He had memorized thousands of these ancient games and openings. This was allowed. Anything was allowed that didn't involve drugs or machines. Self-hypnosis was an accepted tool.

It had taken Brion over two years to find a way to tap the sources of hysterical strength. Common as the phenomenon seemed to be in the textbooks, it proved impossible to duplicate. There appeared to be an immediate association with the death-trauma, as if the two were inextricably linked into one. Berserkers and juramentados continue to fight and kill though carved by scores of mortal wounds. Men with bullets in the heart or brain fight on, though already clinically dead. Death seemed an inescapable part of this kind of strength. But there was another type that could easily be brought

about in any deep trance—hypnotic rigidity. The strength that enables someone in a trance to hold his body stiff and unsupported except at two points, the head and heels. This is physically impossible when conscious. Working with this as a clue, Brion had developed a self-hypnotic technique that allowed him to tap this reservoir of unknown strength—the source of "second wind," the survival strength that made the difference between life and death.

It could also kill—exhaust the body beyond hope of recovery, particularly when in a weakened condition as his was now. But that wasn't important. Others had died before during the Twenties, and death during the last round was in some ways easier than defeat.

Breathing deeply, Brion softly spoke the auto-hypnotic phrases that triggered the process. Fatigue fell softly from him, as did all sensations of heat, cold and pain. He could feel with acute sensitivity, hear, and see clearly when he opened his eyes.

With each passing second the power drew at the basic reserves of life, draining it from his body.

When the buzzer sounded he pulled his foil from his second's startled grasp, and ran forward. Irolg had barely time to grab up his own weapon and parry Brion's first thrust. The force of his rush was so great that the guards on their weapons locked, and their bodies crashed together. Irolg looked amazed at the sudden fury of the attack—then smiled. He thought it was a last burst of energy, he knew how close they both were to exhaustion. This must be the end for Brion.

They disengaged and Irolg put up a solid defense. He didn't attempt to attack, just let Brion wear himself out against the firm shield of his defense.

Brion saw something close to panic on his opponent's face when the man finally recognized his error. Brion wasn't tiring. If anything, he was pressing the attack. A wave of despair rolled out from Irolg—Brion sensed it and knew the fifth point was his.

Thrust—thrust—and each time the parrying sword a little slower to return. Then the powerful twist that thrust it aside. In and under the guard. The slap of the button on flesh and the arc of steel that reached out and ended on Irolg's chest over his heart.

Waves of sound—cheering and screaming—lapped against Brion's private world, but he was only remotely aware of their existence. Irolg dropped his foil, and tried to shake Brion's hand, but his legs suddenly gave way. Brion had an arm around him, holding him up, walking towards the rushing handlers. Then Irolg was gone and he waved off his own men, walking slowly by himself.

Except that something was wrong and it was like walking through warm glue. Walking on his knees. No, not walking, falling. At last. He was able to let go and fall.

II

Ihjel gave the doctors exactly one day before he went to the hospital. Brion wasn't dead, though there had been some doubt about that the night before. Now, a full day later, he was on the mend and that was all Ihjel wanted to know. He bullied and strong-armed his way to the new Winner's room, meeting his first stiff resistance at the door.

"You're out of order, Winner Ihjel," the doctor said. "And if you keep on forcing yourself in here, where you are not wanted, rank or no rank, I shall be obliged to break your head."

Ihjel had just begun to tell him, in some detail, just how slim his chances were of accomplishing that, when Brion interrupted them both. He recognized the newcomer's voice from the final night in the barracks.

"Let him in, Dr. Caulry," he said. "I want to meet a man who thinks there is something more important than the Twenties."

While the doctor stood undecided, Ihjel moved quickly around him and closed the door in his flushed face. He looked down at the Winner in the bed. There was a drip plugged into each one of Brion's arms. His eyes peered from sooty hollows; the eyeballs were a network of red veins. The silent battle he fought against death had left its mark. His square, jutting jaw now seemed all bone, as did his long nose and high cheekbones. They were prominent landmarks rising from the limp greyness of his skin. Only the erect bristle of his close-cropped hair was unchanged. He had the appearance of having suffered a long and wasting illness.

"You look like sin," Ihjel said. "But congratulations on your victory."

"You don't look so very good yourself—for a Winner," Brion snapped back. His exhaustion and sudden peevish anger at this man let the insulting words slip out. Ihjel ignored them.

But it was true; Winner Ihjel looked very little like a Winner, or even an Anvharian. He had the height and the frame all right, but it was draped in billows of fat—rounded, soft tissue that hung loosely from his limbs and made little limp rolls on his neck and under his eyes. There were no fat men on Anvhar, and it was incredible that a man so gross could ever have been a Winner. If there was muscle under the fat it couldn't be seen. Only his eyes appeared to still hold the strength that had once bested every man on the planet to win the annual games. Brion turned away from their burning stare, sorry now he had insulted the man without good reason. He was too sick, though, to bother about apologizing.

Ihjel didn't care either. Brion looked at him again and felt the impression of things so important that he himself, his insults, even the Twenties were of no more interest than dust motes in the air. It was only a fantasy of a sick mind,

Brion knew, and he tried to shake the feeling off. The two men stared at each other, sharing a common emotion.

The door opened soundlessly behind Ihjel and he wheeled about, moving as only an athlete of Anvhar can move. Dr. Caulry was halfway through the door, off balance. Two men in uniform came close behind him. Ihjel's body pushed against them, his speed and the mountainous mass of his flesh sending them back in a tangle of arms and legs. He slammed the door and locked it in their faces.

"I have to talk to you," he said, turning back to Brion. "Privately," he added, bending over and ripping out the communicator with a sweep of one hand.

"Get out," Brion told him. "If I were able—"

"Well, you're not, so you're just going to have to lie there and listen. I imagine we have about five minutes before they decide to break the door down, and I don't want to waste any more of that. Will you come with me offworld? There's a job that must be done; it's my job, but I'm going to need help. You're the only one who can give me that help.

"Now refuse," he added as Brion started to answer.

"Of course I refuse," Brion said, feeling a little foolish and slightly angry, as if the other man had put the words into his mouth. "Anvhar is my planet—why should I leave? My life is here and so is my work. I also might add that I have just won the Twenties. I have a responsibility to remain."

"Nonsense. I'm a Winner, and I left. What you really mean is you would like to enjoy a little of the ego-inflation you have worked so hard to get. Off Anvhar no one even knows what a Winner is—much less respects one. You will have to face a big universe out there, and I don't blame you for being a little frightened."

Someone was hammering loudly on the door.

"I haven't the strength to get angry," Brion said hoarsely. "And I can't bring myself to admire your ideas when they permit you to insult a man too ill to defend himself."

"I apologize," Ihjel said, with no hint of apology or sympathy in his voice. "But there are more desperate issues involved than your hurt feelings. We don't have much time now, so I want to impress you with an idea."

"An idea that will convince me to go offplanet with you? That's expecting a lot."

"No, this idea won't convince you—but thinking about it will. If you really *consider* it you will find a lot of your illusions shattered. Like everyone else on Anvhar, you're a scientific humanist, with your faith firmly planted in the Twenties. You accept both of these noble institutions without an instant's thought. All of you haven't a single thought for the past, for the untold billions who led the bad life as mankind slowly built up the good life for you to lead. Do you ever think of all the people who suffered and died in misery and superstition while civilization was clicking forward one more slow notch?"

"Of course I don't think about them," Brion retorted. "Why should I? I can't

change the past."

"But you can change the future!" Ihjel said. "You owe something to the suffering ancestors who got you where you are today. If Scientific Humanism means anything more than just words to you, you must possess a sense of responsibility. Don't you want to try and pay off a bit of this debt by helping others who are just as backward and disease-ridden today as great-grandfather Troglodyte ever was?"

The hammering on the door was louder. This and the drug-induced buzzing in Brion's ear made thinking difficult. "Abstractly, I of course agree with you," he said haltingly. "But you know there is nothing I can do personally without being emotionally involved. A logical decision is valueless for action without personal meaning."

"Then we have reached the crux of the matter," Ihjel said gently. His back was braced against the door, absorbing the thudding blows of some heavy object on the outside. "They're knocking, so I must be going soon. I have no time for details, but I can assure you upon my word of honor as a Winner that there is something you can do. Only you. If you help me we might save seven million human lives. That is a fact."

The lock burst and the door started to open. Ihjel shouldered it back into the frame for a final instant.

"Here is the idea I want you to consider. Why is it that the people of Anyhar, in a galaxy filled with warring, hate-filled, backward planets, should be the only ones who base their entire existence on a complicated series of games?"

III

This time there was no way to hold the door. Ihjel didn't try. He stepped aside and two men stumbled into the room. He walked out behind their backs without saying a word.

"What happened? What did he do?" the doctor asked, rushing in through the ruined door. He swept a glance over the continuous recording dials at the foot of Brion's bed. Respiration, temperature, heart, blood pressure—all were normal. The patient lay quietly and didn't answer him.

For the rest of that day, Brion had much to think about. It was difficult. The fatigue, mixed with the tranquilizers and other drugs, had softened his contact with reality. His thoughts kept echoing back and forth in his mind, unable to escape. What had Ihjel meant? What was that nonsense about Anvhar? Anvhar was that way because—well, it just was. It had come about naturally. Or had it?

The planet had a very simple history. From the very beginning there had never been anything of real commercial interest on Anvhar. Well off the interstellar trade routes, there were no minerals worth digging and transporting the immense distances to the nearest inhabited worlds. Hunting the winter beasts for their pelts was a profitable but very minor enterprise, never sufficient for mass markets. Therefore no organized attempt had ever been made to colonize the planet. In the end it had been settled completely by chance. A number of offplanet scientific groups had established observation and research stations, finding unlimited data to observe and record during Anvhar's unusual yearly cycle. The long-duration observations encouraged the scientific workers to bring their families and, slowly but steadily, small settlements grew up. Many of the fur hunters settled there as well, adding to the small population. This had been the beginning.

Few records existed of those early days, and the first six centuries of Anvharian history were more speculation than fact. The Breakdown occurred about that time, and in the galaxy-wide disruption Anvhar had to fight its own internal battle. When the Earth Empire collapsed it was the end of more than an era. Many of the observation stations found themselves representing institutions that no longer existed. The professional hunters no longer had markets for their furs, since Anvhar possessed no interstellar ships of its own. There had been no real physical hardship involved in the Breakdown as it affected Anvhar, since the planet was completely self-sufficient. Once they

had made the mental adjustment to the fact that they were now a sovereign world, not a collection of casual visitors with various loyalties, life continued unchanged. Not easy—living on Anvhar is never easy—but at least without difference on the surface.

The thoughts and attitudes of the people were, however, going through a great transformation. Many attempts were made to develop some form of stable society and social relationship. Again, little record exists of these early trials, other than the fact of their culmination in the Twenties.

To understand the Twenties, you have to understand the unusual orbit that Anvhar tracks around its sun, 70 Ophiuchi. There are other planets in this system, all of them more or less conforming to the plane of the ecliptic. Anvhar is obviously a rogue, perhaps a captured planet of another sun. For the greatest part of its 780-day year it arcs far out from its primary, in a high-angled sweeping cometary orbit. When it returns there is a brief, hot summer of approximately eighty days before the long winter sets in once more. This severe difference in seasonal change has caused profound adaptations in the native life forms. During the winter most of the animals hibernate, the vegetable life lying dormant as spores or seeds. Some of the warm-blooded herbivores stay active in the snow-covered tropics, preyed upon by fur-insulated carnivores. Though unbelievably cold, the winter is a season of peace in comparison to the summer.

For summer is a time of mad growth. Plants burst into life with a strength that cracks rocks, growing fast enough for the motion to be seen. The snowfields melt into mud and within days a jungle stretches high into the air. Everything grows, swells, proliferates. Plants climb on top of plants, fighting for the life-energy of the sun. Everything is eat and be eaten, grow and thrive in that short season. Because when the first snow of winter falls again, ninety per cent of the year must pass until the next coming of warmth.

Mankind has had to adapt to the Anvharian cycle in order to stay alive. Food must be gathered and stored, enough to last out the long winter. Generation after generation had adapted until they look on the mad seasonal imbalance as something quite ordinary. The first thaw of the almost nonexistent spring triggers a wide-reaching metabolic change in the humans. Layers of subcutaneous fat vanish and half-dormant sweat glands come to life. Other changes are more subtle than the temperature adjustment, but equally important. The sleep center of the brain is depressed. Short naps or a night's rest every third or fourth day becomes enough. Life takes on a hectic and hysterical quality that is perfectly suited to the environment. By the time of the first frost, rapid-growing crops have been raised and harvested, sides of meat either preserved or frozen in mammoth lockers. With this supreme talent of adaptability mankind has become part of the ecology and guaranteed his own survival during the long winter.

Physical survival has been guaranteed. But what about mental survival? Primitive Earth Eskimos can fall into a long doze of half-conscious

hibernation. Civilized men might be able to do this, but only for the few cold months of terrestrial midwinter. It would be impossible to do during a winter that is longer than an Earth year. With all the physical needs taken care of, boredom became the enemy of any Anvharian who was not a hunter. And even the hunters could not stay out on solitary trek all winter. Drink was one answer, and violence another. Alcoholism and murder were the twin terrors of the cold season, after the Breakdown.

It was the Twenties that ended all that. When they became a part of normal life the summer was considered just an interlude between games. The Twenties were more than just a contest—they became a way of life that satisfied all the physical, competitive and intellectual needs of this unusual planet. They were a decathlon—rather a double decathlon—raised to its highest power, where contests in chess and poetry composition held equal place with those in ski-jumping and archery. Each year there were two planet-wide contests held, one for men and one for women. This was not an attempt at sexual discrimination, but a logical facing of facts. Inherent differences prevented fair contests—for example, it is impossible for a woman to win a large chess tournament—and this fact was recognized. Anyone could enter for any number of years. There were no scoring handicaps.

When the best man won he was really the best man. A complicated series of playoffs and eliminations kept contestants and observers busy for half the winter. They were only preliminary to the final encounter that lasted a month, and picked a single winner. That was the title he was awarded. Winner. The man—and woman—who had bested every other contestant on the entire planet and who would remain unchallenged until the following year.

Winner. It was a title to take pride in. Brion stirred weakly on his bed and managed to turn so he could look out of the window. Winner of Anvhar. His name was already slated for the history books, one of the handful of planetary heroes. School children would be studying *him* now, just as he had read of the Winners of the past. Weaving daydreams and imaginary adventures around Brion's victories, hoping and fighting to equal them someday. To be a Winner was the greatest honor in the universe.

Outside, the afternoon sun shimmered weakly in a dark sky. The endless icefields soaked up the dim light, reflecting it back as a colder and harsher illumination. A single figure on skis cut a line across the empty plain; nothing else moved. The depression of the ultimate fatigue fell on Brion and everything changed, as if he looked in a mirror at a previously hidden side.

He saw suddenly—with terrible clarity—that to be a Winner was to be absolutely nothing. Like being the best flea, among all the fleas on a single dog.

What was Anvhar after all? An ice-locked planet, inhabited by a few million human fleas, unknown and unconsidered by the rest of the galaxy. There was nothing here worth fighting for; the wars after the Breakdown had left them untouched. The Anvharians had always taken pride in this—as if

being so unimportant that no one else even wanted to come near you could possibly be a source of pride. All the other worlds of man grew, fought, won, lost, changed. Only on Anvhar did life repeat its sameness endlessly, like a loop of tape in a player....

Brion's eyes were moist; he blinked. *Tears!* Realization of this incredible fact wiped the maudlin pity from his mind and replaced it with fear. Had his mind snapped in the strain of the last match? These thoughts weren't his. Self-pity hadn't made him a Winner—why was he feeling it now? Anvhar was his universe—how could he even imagine it as a tag-end planet at the outer limb of creation? What had come over him and induced this inverse thinking?

As he thought the question, the answer appeared at the same instant. Winner Ihjel. The fat man with the strange pronouncements and probing questions. Had he cast a spell like some sorcerer—or the devil in *Faust*? No, that was pure nonsense. But he had done something. Perhaps planted a suggestion when Brion's resistance was low. Or used subliminal vocalization like the villain in *Cerebrus Chained*. Brion could find no adequate reason on which to base his suspicions. But he knew, with sure positiveness, that Ihjel was responsible.

He whistled at the sound-switch next to his pillow and the repaired communicator came to life. The duty nurse appeared in the small screen.

"The man who was here today," Brion said, "Winner Ihjel. Do you know where he is? I must contact him."

For some reason this flustered her professional calm. The nurse started to answer, excused herself, and blanked the screen. When it lit again a man in guard's uniform had taken her place.

"You made an inquiry," the guard said, "about Winner Ihjel. We are holding him here in the hospital, following the disgraceful way in which he broke into your room."

"I have no charges to make. Will you ask him to come and see me at once?"

The guard controlled his shock. "I'm sorry, Winner—I don't see how we can. Dr. Caulry left specific orders that you were not to be—"

"The doctor has no control over my personal life." Brion interrupted. "I'm not infectious, nor ill with anything more than extreme fatigue. I want to see that man. At once."

The guard took a deep breath, and made a quick decision. "He is on the way up now," he said, and rung off.

"What did you do to me?" Brion asked as soon as Ihjel had entered and they were alone. "You won't deny that you have put alien thoughts in my head?"

"No, I won't deny it. Because the whole point of my being here is to get those 'alien' thoughts across to you."

"Tell me how you did it," Brion insisted. "I must know."

"I'll tell you—but there are many things you should understand first, before you decide to leave Anvhar. You must not only hear them, you will have to believe them. The primary thing, the clue to the rest, is the true nature of your

life here. How do you think the Twenties originated?"

Before he answered, Brion carefully took a double dose of the mild stimulant he was allowed. "I don't think," he said; "I know. It's a matter of historical record. The founder of the games was Girolodi, the first contest was held in 378 A.B. The Twenties have been held every year since then. They were strictly local affairs in the beginning, but were soon well established on a planet-wide scale."

"True enough," Ihjel said. "But you're describing *what* happened. I asked you *how* the Twenties originated. How could any single man take a barbarian planet, lightly inhabited by half-mad hunters and alcoholic farmers, and turn it into a smooth-running social machine built around the artificial structure of the Twenties? It just couldn't be done."

"But it *was* done!" Brion insisted. "You can't deny that. And there is nothing artificial about the Twenties. They are a logical way to live a life on a planet like this."

Ihjel laughed, a short ironic bark. "Very logical," he said; "but how often does logic have anything to do with the organization of social groups and governments? You're not thinking. Put yourself in founder Girolodi's place. Imagine that you have glimpsed the great idea of the Twenties and you want to convince others. So you walk up to the nearest louse-ridden, brawling, superstitious, booze-embalmed hunter and explain clearly. How a program of his favorite sports—things like poetry, archery and chess—can make his life that much more interesting and virtuous. You do that. But keep your eyes open at the same time, and be ready for a fast draw."

Even Brion had to smile at the absurdity of the suggestion. Of course it couldn't happen that way. Yet, since it had happened, there must be a simple explanation.

"We can beat this back and forth all day," Ihjel told him, "and you won't get the right idea unless—" He broke off suddenly, staring at the communicator. The operation light had come on, though the screen stayed dark. Ihjel reached down a meaty hand and pulled loose the recently connected wires. "That doctor of yours is very curious—and he's going to stay that way. The truth behind the Twenties is none of his business. But it's going to be yours. You must come to realize that the life you lead here is a complete and artificial construction, developed by Societics experts and put into application by skilled field workers."

"Nonsense!" Brion broke in. "Systems of society can't be dreamed up and forced on people like that. Not without bloodshed and violence."

"Nonsense, yourself," Ihjel told him. "That may have been true in the dawn of history, but not any more. You have been reading too many of the old Earth classics; you imagine that we still live in the Ages of Superstition. Just because fascism and communism were once forced on reluctant populations, you think this holds true for all time. Go back to your books. In exactly the same era democracy and self-government were adapted by former colonial

states, like India and the Union of North Africa, and the only violence was between local religious groups. Change is the lifeblood of mankind. Everything we today accept as normal was at one time an innovation. And one of the most recent innovations is the attempt to guide the societies of mankind into something more consistent with the personal happiness of individuals."

"The God complex," Brion said; "forcing human lives into a mold whether they want to be fitted into it or not."

"Societies can be that," Ihjel agreed. "It was in the beginning, and there were some disastrous results of attempts to force populations into a political climate where they didn't belong. They weren't all failures—Anvhar here is a striking example of how good the technique can be when correctly applied. It's not done this way any more, though. As with all of the other sciences, we have found out that the more we know, the more there is to know. We no longer attempt to guide cultures towards what we consider a beneficial goal. There are too many goals, and from our limited vantage point it is hard to tell the good ones from the bad ones. All we do now is try to protect the growing cultures, give a little jolt to the stagnating ones—and bury the dead ones. When the work was first done here on Anvhar the theory hadn't progressed that far. The understandably complex equations that determine just where in the scale from a Type I to a Type V a culture is, had not yet been completed. The technique then was to work out an artificial culture that would be most beneficial for a planet, then bend it into the mold."

"How can that be done?" Brion asked. "How was it done here?"

"We've made some progress—you're finally asking 'how.' The technique here took a good number of agents, and a great deal of money. Personal honor was emphasized in order to encourage dueling, and this led to a heightened interest in the technique of personal combat. When this was well entrenched Girolodi was brought in, and he showed how organized competitions could be more interesting than haphazard encounters. Tying the intellectual aspects onto the framework of competitive sports was a little more difficult, but not overwhelmingly so. The details aren't important; all we are considering now is the end product. Which is you. You're needed very much."

"Why me?" Brion asked. "Why am I special? Because I won the Twenties? I can't believe that. Taken objectively, there isn't that much difference between myself and the ten runner-ups. Why don't you ask one of them? They could do your job as well as I."

"No, they couldn't. I'll tell you later why you are the only man I can use. Our time is running out and I must convince you of some other things first." Ihjel glanced at his watch. "We have less than three hours to dead-deadline. Before that time I must explain enough of our work to you to enable you to decide voluntarily to join us."

"A very tall order," Brion said. "You might begin by telling me just who this mysterious 'we' is that you keep referring to."

"The Cultural Relationships Foundation. A non-governmental body,

privately endowed, existing to promote peace and ensure the sovereign welfare of independent planets, so that all will prosper from the good will and commerce thereby engendered."

"Sounds as if you're quoting," Brion told him. "No one could possibly make up something that sounds like that on the spur of the moment."

"I *was* quoting, from our charter of organization. Which is all very fine in a general sense, but I'm talking specifically now. About you. You are the product of a tightly knit and very advanced society. Your individuality has been encouraged by your growing up in a society so small in population that a mild form of government control is necessary. The normal Anvharian education is an excellent one, and participation in the Twenties has given you a general and advanced education second to none in the galaxy. It would be a complete waste of your entire life if you now took all this training and wasted it on some rustic farm."

"You give me very little credit. I plan to teach—"

"Forget Anvhari!" Ihjel cut him off with a chop of his hand. "This world will roll on quite successfully whether you are here or not. You must forget it, think of its relative unimportance on a galactic scale, and consider instead the existing, suffering hordes of mankind. You must think what you can do to help them."

"But what can I do—as an individual? The day is long past when a single man, like Caesar or Alexander, could bring about world-shaking changes."

"True—but not true," Ihjel said. "There are key men in every conflict of forces, men who act like catalysts applied at the right instant to start a chemical reaction. You might be one of these men, but I must be honest and say that I can't prove it yet. So in order to save time and endless discussion, I think I will have to spark your personal sense of obligation."

"Obligation to whom?"

"To mankind, of course, to the countless billions of dead who kept the whole machine rolling along that allows you the full, long and happy life you enjoy today. What they gave to you, you must pass on to others. This is the keystone of humanistic morals."

"Agreed. And a very good argument in the long run. But not one that is going to tempt me out of this bed within the next three hours."

"A point of success," Ihjel said. "You agree with the general argument. Now I apply it specifically to you. Here is the statement I intend to prove. There exists a planet with a population of seven million people. Unless I can prevent it, this planet will be completely destroyed. It is my job to stop that destruction, so that is where I am going now. I won't be able to do the job alone. In addition to others, I need you. Not anyone like you—but you, and you alone."

"You have precious little time left to convince me of all that," Brion told him, "so let me make the job easier for you. The work you do, this planet, the imminent danger of the people there—these are all facts that you can

undoubtedly supply. I'll take a chance that this whole thing is not a colossal bluff, and admit that given time, you could verify them all. This brings the argument back to me again. How can you possibly prove that I am the only person in the galaxy who can help you?"

"I can prove it by your singular ability, the thing I came here to find."

"Ability? I am different in no way from the other men on my planet."

"You're wrong," Ihjel said. "You are the embodied proof of evolution. Rare individuals with specific talents occur constantly in any species, man included. It has been two generations since an empathetic was last born on Anvhar, and I have been watching carefully most of that time."

"What in blazes is an empathetic—and how do you recognize it when you have found it?" Brion chuckled, this talk was getting preposterous.

"I can recognize one because I'm one myself—there is no other way. As to how projective empathy works, you had a demonstration of that a little earlier, when you felt those strange thoughts about Anvhar. It will be a long time before you can master that, but receptive empathy is your natural trait. This is mentally entering into the feeling, or what could be called the spirit of another person. Empathy is not thought perception; it might better be described as the sensing of someone else's emotional makeup, feelings and attitudes. You can't lie to a trained empathetic, because he can sense the real attitude behind the verbal lies. Even your undeveloped talent has proved immensely useful in the Twenties. You can outguess your opponent because you know his movements even as his body tenses to make them. You accept this without ever questioning it."

"How do you know?" This was Brion's understood, but never voiced secret.

Ihjel smiled. "Just guessing. But I won the Twenties too, remember, also without knowing a thing about empathy at the time. On top of our normal training, it's a wonderful trait to have. Which brings me to the proof we mentioned a minute ago. When you said you would be convinced if I could prove you were the only person who could help me. I *believe* you are—and that is one thing I cannot lie about. It's possible to lie about a belief verbally, to have a falsely based belief, or to change a belief. But you can't lie about it to yourself.

"Equally important—you can't lie about a belief to an empathetic. Would you like to see how I feel about this? 'See' is a bad word—there is no vocabulary yet for this kind of thing. Better, would you join me in my feelings? Sense my attitudes, memories and emotions just as I do?"

Brion tried to protest, but he was too late. The doors of his senses were pushed wide and he was overwhelmed.

"Dis ..." Ihjel said aloud. "Seven million people ... hydrogen bombs ... Brion Brandd." These were just key words, landmarks of association. With each one Brion felt the rushing wave of the other man's emotions.

There could be no lies here—Ihjel was right in that. This was the raw stuff that feelings are made of, the basic reactions to the things and symbols of

memory.

DIS ... DIS ... DIS ... it was a word it was a planet and the word thundered
like a drum a drum the sound
of its thunder surrounded and
was a wasteland a planet
of death a planet where
living was dying and
dying was very
better than
living
DIS
crude barbaric
backward miserable
dirty beneath
consideration
planet
hot burning scorching
wasteland of sands
and sands and sands and
sands that burned had
burned will burn forever
the people of this planet so
crude dirty miserable barbaric
sub-human in-human
less-than-human
but
they
were
going
to
be
DEAD
and DEAD they would be seven million blackened corpses
that would blacken your dreams all dreams dreams
forever because those
HYDROGEN BOMBS
were waiting
to kill
them unless .. unless .. unless ..
you Ihjel stopped it you Ihjel (DEATH) you (DEATH)
you (DEATH) alone couldn't do it you (DEATH)
must have
BRION BRANDD wet-behind-the-ears-raw-untrained-
Brion-Brandd-to-help-you he was the only one in the
galaxy who could finish the job.....

As the flow of sensation died away, Brion realized he was sprawled back weakly on his pillows, soaked with sweat, washed with the memory of the raw emotion. Across from him Ihjel sat with his face bowed in his hands. When he lifted his head Brion saw within his eyes a shadow of the blackness he had just experienced.

"Death," Brion said. "That terrible feeling of death. It wasn't just the people of Dis who would die. It was something more personal."

"Myself," Ihjel said, and behind this simple word were the repeated echoes of night that Brion had been made aware of with his newly recognized ability. "My own death, not too far away. This is the wonderfully terrible price you must pay for your talent. *Angst* is an inescapable part of empathy. It is a part of the whole unknown field of psi phenomena that seems to be independent of time. Death is so traumatic and final that it reverberates back along the time line. The closer I get, the more aware of it I am. There is no exact feeling of date, just a rough location in time. That is the horror of it. I *know* I will die soon after I get to Dis—and long before the work there is finished. I know the

job to be done there, and I know the men who have already failed at it. I also know you are the only person who can possibly complete the work I have started. Do you agree now? Will you come with me?"

"Yes, of course," Brion said. "I'll go with you."

IV

"I've never seen anyone quite as angry as that doctor," Brion said.

"Can't blame him." Ihjel shifted his immense weight and grunted from the console, where he was having a coded conversation with the ship's brain. He hit the keys quickly, and read the answer from the screen. "You took away his medical moment of glory. How many times in his life will he have a chance to nurse back to rugged smiling health the triumphantly exhausted Winner of the Twenties?"

"Not many, I imagine. The wonder of it is how you managed to convince him that you and the ship here could take care of me as well as his hospital could."

"I could never convince him of that," Ihjel said. "But I and the Cultural Relationships Foundation have some powerful friends on Anvhar. I'm forced to admit I brought a little pressure to bear." He leaned back and read the course tape as it streamed out of the printer. "We have a little time to spare, but I would rather spend it waiting at the other end. We'll blast as soon as I have you tied down in a stasis field."

The completeness of the stasis field leaves no impressions on the body or mind. In it there is no weight, no pressure, no pain—no sensation of any kind. Except for a stasis of very long duration, there is no sensation of time. To Brion's consciousness, Ihjel flipped the switch off with a continuation of the same motion that had turned it on. The ship was unchanged, only outside of the port was the red-shot blankness of jump-space.

"How do you feel?" Ihjel asked.

Apparently the ship was wondering the same thing. Its detector unit, hovering impatiently just outside of Brion's stasis field, darted down and settled on his bare forearm. The doctor back on Anvhar had given the medical section of the ship's brain a complete briefing. A quick check of a dozen factors of Brion's metabolism was compared to the expected norm. Apparently everything was going well, because the only reaction was the expected injection of vitamins and glucose.

"I can't say I'm feeling wonderful yet," Brion answered, levering himself higher on the pillows. "But every day it's a bit better—steady progress."

"I hope so, because we have about two weeks before we get to Dis. Do you think you'll be back in shape by that time?"

"No promises," Brion said, giving a tentative squeeze to one bicep. "It should be enough time, though. Tomorrow I start mild exercise and that will tighten me up again. Now—tell me more about Dis and what you have to do there."

"I'm not going to do it twice, so just save your curiosity awhile. We're

heading for a rendezvous point now to pick up another operator. This is going to be a three-man team, you, me and an exobiologist. As soon as he is aboard I'll do a complete briefing for you both at the same time. What you can do now is get your head into the language box and start working on your Disan. You'll want to speak it perfectly by the time we touchdown."

With an autohypno for complete recall, Brion had no difficulty in mastering the grammar and vocabulary of Disan. Pronunciation was a different matter altogether. Almost all the word endings were swallowed, muffled or gargled. The language was rich in glottal stops, clicks and guttural strangling sounds. Ihjel stayed in a different part of the ship when Brion used the voice mirror and analysis scope, claiming that the awful noises interfered with his digestion.

Their ship angled through jump-space along its calculated course. It kept its fragile human cargo warm, fed them and supplied breathable air. It had orders to worry about Brion's health, so it did, checking constantly against its recorded instructions and noting his steady progress. Another part of the ship's brain counted microseconds with moronic fixation, finally closing a relay when a predetermined number had expired in its heart. A light flashed and a buzzer hummed gently but insistently.

Ihjel yawned, put away the report he had been reading, and started for the control room. He shuddered when he passed the room where Brion was listening to a playback of his Disan efforts.

"Turn off that dying brontosaurus and get strapped in," he called through the thin door. "We're coming to the point of optimum possibility and well be dropping back into normal space soon."

The human mind can ponder the incredible distances between the stars, but cannot possibly contain within itself a real understanding of them. Marked out on a man's hand an inch is a large unit of measure. In interstellar space a cubical area with sides a hundred thousand miles long is a microscopically fine division. Light crosses this distance in a fraction of a second. To a ship moving with a relative speed far greater than that of light, this measuring unit is even smaller. Theoretically, it appears impossible to find a particular area of this size. Technologically, it was a repeatable miracle that occurred too often to even be interesting.

Brion and Ihjel were strapped in when the jump-drive cut off abruptly, lurching them back into normal space and time. They didn't unstrap, but just sat and looked at the dimly distant pattern of stars. A single sun, apparently of fifth magnitude, was their only neighbor in this lost corner of the universe. They waited while the computer took enough star sights to triangulate a position in three dimensions, muttering to itself electronically while it did the countless calculations to find their position. A warning bell chimed and the drive cut on and off so quickly that the two acts seemed simultaneous. This happened again, twice, before the brain was satisfied it had made as good a fix as possible and flashed a NAVIGATION POWER OFF light. Ihjel

unstrapped, stretched, and made them a meal.

Ihjel had computed their passage time with precise allowances. Less than ten hours after they arrived a powerful signal blasted into their waiting receiver. They strapped in again as the NAVIGATION POWER ON signal blinked insistently.

A ship had paused in flight somewhere relatively near in the vast volume of space. It had entered normal space just long enough to emit a signal of radio query on an assigned wave length. Ihjel's ship had detected this and instantly responded with a verifying signal. The passenger spacer had accepted this assurance and gracefully laid a ten-foot metal egg in space. As soon as this had cleared its jump field the parent ship vanished towards its destination, light years away.

Ihjel's ship climbed up the signal it had received. This signal had been recorded and examined minutely. Angle, strength and Doppler movement were computed to find course and distance. A few minutes of flight were enough to get within range of the far weaker transmitter in the drop-capsule. Homing on this signal was so simple, a human pilot could have done it himself. The shining sphere loomed up, then vanished out of sight of the viewports as the ship rotated to bring the spacelock into line. Magnetic clamps cut in when they made contact.

"Go down and let the bug-doctor in," Ihjel said. "I'll stay and monitor the board in case of trouble."

"What do I have to do?"

"Get into a suit and open the outer lock. Most of the drop sphere is made of inflatable metallic foil, so don't bother to look for the entrance. Just cut a hole in it with the oversize can-opener you'll find in the tool box. After Dr. Morees gets aboard jettison the thing. Only get the radio and locator unit out first—it gets used again."

The tool did look like a giant can-opener. Brion carefully felt the resilient metal skin that covered the lock entrance, until he was sure there was nothing on the other side. Then he jabbed the point through and cut a ragged hole in the thin foil. Dr. Morees boiled out of the sphere, knocking Brion aside.

"What's the matter?" Brion asked.

There was no radio on the other's suit; he couldn't answer. But he did shake his fist angrily. The helmet ports were opaque, so there was no way to tell what expressions went with the gesture. Brion shrugged and turned back to salvaging the equipment pack, pushing the punctured balloon free and sealing the lock. When pressure was pumped back to ship-normal, he cracked his helmet and motioned the other to do the same.

"You're a pack of dirty lying dogs!" Dr. Morees said when the helmet came off. Brion was completely baffled. Dr. Lea Morees had long dark hair, large eyes, and a delicately shaped mouth now taut with anger. Dr. Morees was a woman.

"Are you the filthy swine responsible for this atrocity?" Dr. Morees asked

menacingly.

"In the control room," Brion said quickly, knowing when cowardice was preferable to valor. "A man named Ihjel. There's a lot of him to hate, you can have a good time doing it. I just joined up myself...." He was talking to her back as she stormed from the room. Brion hurried after her, not wanting to miss the first human spark of interest in the trip to date.

"Kidnapped! Lied to, and forced against my will! There is no court in the galaxy that won't give you the maximum sentence, and I'll scream with pleasure as they roll your fat body into solitary—"

"They shouldn't have sent a woman," Ihjel said, completely ignoring her words. "I asked for a highly qualified exobiologist for a difficult assignment. Someone young and tough enough to do field work under severe conditions. So the recruiting office sends me the smallest female they can find, one who'll melt in the first rain."

"I will not!" Lea shouted. "Female resiliency is a well-known fact, and I'm in far better condition than the average woman. Which has nothing to do with what I'm telling you. I was hired for a job in the university on Moller's World and signed a contract to that effect. Then this bully of an agent tells me the contract has been changed—read subparagraph 189-C or some such nonsense—and I'll be transhipping. He stuffed me into that suffocating basketball without a by-your-leave and they threw me overboard. If that is not a violation of personal privacy—"

"Cut a new course, Brion," Ihjel broke in. "Find the nearest settled planet and head us there. We have to drop this woman and find a man for this job. We are going to what is undoubtedly the most interesting planet an exobiologist ever conceived of, but we need a man who can take orders and not faint when it gets too hot."

Brion was lost. Ihjel had done all the navigating and Brion had no idea how to begin a search like this.

"Oh, no you don't," Lea said. "You don't get rid of me that easily. I placed first in my class, and most of the five hundred other students were male. This is only a man's universe because the men say so. What is the name of this garden planet where we are going?"

"Dis. I'll give you a briefing as soon as I get this ship on course." He turned to the controls and Lea slipped out of her suit and went into the lavatory to comb her hair. Brion closed his mouth, aware suddenly it had been open for a long time. "Is that what you call applied psychology?" he asked.

"Not really. She was going to go along with the job in the end—since she did sign the contract even if she didn't read the fine print—but not until she had exhausted her feelings. I just shortened the process by switching her onto the male-superiority hate. Most women who succeed in normally masculine fields have a reflexive antipathy there; they have been hit on the head with it so much."

He fed the course tape into the console and scowled. "But there was a good

chunk of truth in what I said. I wanted a young, fit and highly qualified biologist from recruiting. I never thought they would find a female one—and it's too late to send her back now. Dis is no place for a woman."

"Why?" Brion asked, as Lea appeared in the doorway.

"Come inside, and I'll show you both," Ihjel said.

V

"Dis," Ihjel said, consulting a thick file, "third planet out from its primary, Epsilon Eridani. The fourth planet is Nyjord—remember that, because it is going to be very important. Dis is a place you need a good reason to visit and no reason at all to leave. Too hot, too dry; the temperature in the temperate zones rarely drops below a hundred Fahrenheit. The planet is nothing but scorched rock and burning sand. Most of the water is underground and normally inaccessible. The surface water is all in the form of briny, chemically saturated swamps—undrinkable without extensive processing. All the facts and figures are here in the folder and you can study them later. Right now I want you just to get the idea that this planet is as loathsome and inhospitable as they come. So are the people. This is a solido of a Disan."

Lea gasped at the three-dimensional representation on the screen. Not at the physical aspects of the man; as a biologist trained in the specialty of alien life she had seen a lot stranger sights. It was the man's pose, the expression on his face—tensed to leap, his lips drawn back to show all of this teeth.

"He looks as if he wanted to kill the photographer," she said.

"He almost did—just after the picture was taken. Like all Disans, he has an overwhelming hatred and loathing of offworlders. Not without good reason, though. His planet was settled completely by chance during the Breakdown. I'm not sure of the details, but the overall picture is clear, since the story of their desertion forms the basis of all the myths and animistic religions on Dis.

"Apparently there were large-scale mining operations carried on there once; the world is rich enough in minerals and mining them is very simple. But water came only from expensive extraction processes and I imagine most of the food came from offworld. Which was good enough until the settlement was forgotten, the way a lot of other planets were during the Breakdown. All the records were destroyed in the fighting, and the ore carriers were pressed into military service. Dis was on its own. What happened to the people there is a tribute to the adaptation possibilities of homo sapiens. Individuals died, usually in enormous pain, but the race lived. Changed a good deal, but still human. As the water and food ran out and the extraction machinery broke down, they must have made heroic efforts to survive. They couldn't do it mechanically, but by the time the last machine collapsed, enough people were adjusted to the environment to keep the race going.

"Their descendants are still there, completely adapted to the environment. Their body temperatures are around a hundred and thirty degrees. They have specialized tissue in the gluteal area for storing water. These are minor changes, compared to the major ones they have done in fitting themselves for this planet. I don't know the exact details, but the reports are very enthusiastic

about symbiotic relationships. They assure us that this is the first time homo sapiens has been an active part of either commensalism or inquilinism other than in the role of host."

"Wonderful!" Lea exclaimed.

"Is it?" Ihjel scowled. "Perhaps from the abstract scientific point of view. If you can keep notes perhaps you might write a book about it some time. But I'm not interested. I'm sure all these morphological changes and disgusting intimacies will fascinate you, Dr. Morees. But while you are counting blood types and admiring your thermometers, I hope you will be able to devote a little time to a study of the Disans' obnoxious personalities. We must either find out what makes these people tick—or we are going to have to stand by and watch the whole lot blown up!"

"Going to do what!" Lea gasped. "Destroy them? Wipe out this fascinating genetic pool? Why?"

"Because they are so incredibly loathsome, that's why!" Ihjel said. "These aboriginal hotheads have managed to lay their hands on some primitive cobalt bombs. They want to light the fuse and drop these bombs on Nyjord, the next planet. Nothing said or done can convince them differently. They demand unconditional surrender, or else. This is impossible for a lot of reasons—most important, because the Nyjorders would like to keep their planet for their very own. They have tried every kind of compromise but none of them works. The Disans are out to commit racial suicide. A Nyjord fleet is now over Dis and the deadline has almost expired for the surrender of the cobalt bombs. The Nyjord ships carry enough H-bombs to turn the entire planet into an atomic pile. That is what we must stop."

Brion looked at the solido on the screen, trying to make some judgment of the man. Bare, horny feet. A bulky, ragged length of cloth around the waist was the only garment. What looked like a piece of green vine was hooked over one shoulder. From a plaited belt were suspended a number of odd devices made of hand-beaten metal, drilled stone and looped leather. The only recognizable item was a thin knife of unusual design. Loops of piping, flared bells, carved stones tied in senseless patterns of thonging gave the rest of the collection a bizarre appearance. Perhaps they had some religious significance. But the well-worn and handled look of most of them gave Brion an uneasy sensation. If they were used—what in the universe could they be used *for*?

"I can't believe it," he finally concluded. "Except for the exotic hardware, this lowbrow looks as if he has sunk back into the Stone Age. I don't see how his kind can be any real threat to another planet."

"The Nyjorders believe it, and that's good enough for me," Ihjel said. "They are paying our Cultural Relationships Foundation a good sum to try and prevent this war. Since they are our employers, we must do what they ask." Brion ignored this large lie, since it was obviously designed as an explanation for Lea. But he made a mental note to query Ihjel later about the real situation.

"Here are the tech reports." Ihjel dropped them on the table. "Dis has some

spacers as well as the cobalt bombs—though these aren't the real threat. A tramp trader was picked up *leaving* Dis. It had delivered a jump-space launcher that can drop those bombs on Nyjord while anchored to the bedrock of Dis. While essentially a peaceful and happy people, the Nyjorders were justifiably annoyed at this and convinced the tramp's captain to give them some more information. It's all here. Boiled down, it gives a minimum deadline by which time the launcher can be set up and start throwing bombs."

"When is that deadline?" Lea asked.

"In ten more days. If the situation hasn't been changed drastically by then, the Nyjorders are going to wipe all life from the face of Dis. I assure you they don't want to do it. But they will drop the bombs in order to assure their own survival."

"What am I supposed to do?" Lea asked, flipping the pages of the report. "I don't know a thing about nucleonics or jump-space. I'm an exobiologist, with a supplementary degree in anthropology. What help could I possibly be?"

Ihjel looked down at her, stroking his jaw, fingers sunk deep into the rolls of flesh. "My faith in our recruiters is restored," he said. "That's a combination that is probably rare—even on Earth. You're as scrawny as an underfed chicken, but young enough to survive if we keep a close eye on you." He cut off Lea's angry protest with a raised hand. "No more bickering. There isn't time. The Nyjorders must have lost over thirty agents trying to find the bombs. Our foundation has had six people killed—including my late predecessor in charge of the project. He was a good man, but I think he went at this problem the wrong way. I think it is a cultural one, not a physical one."

"Run it through again with the power turned up," Lea said, frowning. "All I hear is static."

"It's the old problem of genesis. Like Newton and the falling apple, Levy and the hysteresis in the warp field. Everything has a beginning. If we can find out why these people are so hell-bent on suicide we might be able to change the reasons. Not that I intend to stop looking for the bombs or the jump-space generator either. We are going to try anything that will avert this planetary murder."

"You're a lot brighter than you look," Lea said, rising and carefully stacking the sheets of the report. "You can count on me for complete cooperation. Now I'll study all this in bed if one of you overweight gentlemen will show me to a room with a strong lock on the inside of the door. Don't call me; I'll call you when I want breakfast."

Brion wasn't sure how much of her barbed speech was humor and how much was serious, so he said nothing. He showed her to an empty cabin—she did lock the door—then looked for Ihjel. The Winner was in the galley adding to his girth with an immense gelatin dessert that filled a good-sized tureen.

"Is she short for a native Terran?" Brion asked. "The top of her head is below my chin."

"That's the norm. Earth is a reservoir of tired genes. Weak backs,

vermiform appendixes, bad eyes. If they didn't have the universities and the trained people we need I would never use them."

"Why did you lie to her about the Foundation?"

"Because it's a secret— isn't that reason enough?" Ihjel rumbled angrily, scraping the last dregs from the bowl. "Better eat something. Build up the strength. The Foundation has to maintain its undercover status if it is going to accomplish anything. If she returns to Earth after this it's better that she should know nothing of our real work. If she joins up, there'll be time enough to tell her. But I doubt if she will like the way we operate. Particularly since I plan to drop some H-bombs on Dis myself—if we can't turn off the war."

"I don't believe it!"

"You heard me correctly. Don't bulge your eyes and look moronic. As a last resort I'll drop the bombs myself rather than let the Nyjorders do it. That might save them."

"Save them—they'd all be radiated and dead!" Brion's voice rose in anger.

"Not the Disans. I want to save the Nyjorders. Stop clenching your fists and sit down and have some of this cake. It's delicious. The Nyjorders are all that counts here. They have a planet blessed by the laws of chance. When Dis was cut off from outside contact, the survivors turned into a gang of swampcrawling homicidals. It did the opposite for Nyjord. You can survive there just by pulling fruit off a tree. The population was small, educated, intelligent. Instead of sinking into an eternal siesta they matured into a vitally different society. Not mechanical—they weren't even using the wheel when they were rediscovered. They became sort of cultural specialists, digging deep into the philosophical aspects of interrelationship—the thing that machine societies never have had time for. Of course this was ready-made for the Cultural Relationships Foundation, and we have been working with them ever since. Not guiding so much as protecting them from any blows that might destroy this growing idea. But we've fallen down on the job. Nonviolence is essential to these people—they have vitality without needing destruction. But if they are forced to blow up Dis for their own survival—against every one of their basic tenets—their philosophy won't endure. Physically they'll live on, as just one more dog-eat-dog planet with an A-bomb for any of the competition who drop behind."

"Sounds like paradise now."

"Don't be smug. It's just another worldful of people with the same old likes, dislikes and hatreds. But they are evolving a way of living together, without violence, that may some day form the key to mankind's survival. They are worth looking after. Now get below and study your Disan and read the reports. Get it all pat before we land."

VI

"Identify yourself, please." The quiet words from the speaker in no way appeared to coincide with the picture on the screen. The spacer that had matched their orbit over Dis had recently been a freighter. A quick conversion had tacked the hulking shape of a primary weapons turret on top of her hull. The black disc of the immense muzzle pointed squarely at them. Ihjel switched open the ship-to-ship communication channel.

"This is Ihjel. Retinal pattern 490-BJ4-67—which is also the code that is supposed to get me through your blockade. Do you want to check that pattern?"

"There will be no need, thank you. If you will turn on your recorder I have a message relayed to you from Prime-four."

"Recording and out," Ihjel said. "Damn! Trouble already, and four days to blowup. Prime-four is our headquarters on Dis. This ship carries a cover cargo so we can land at the spaceport. This is probably a change of plan and I don't like the smell of it."

There was something behind Ihjel's grumbling this time, and without conscious effort Brion could sense the chilling touch of the other man's *angst*. Trouble was waiting for them on the planet below. When the message was typed by the decoder Ihjel hovered over it, reading each word as it appeared on the paper. When it was finished he only snorted and went below to the galley. Brion pulled the message out of the machine and read it.

IHJEL IHJEL IHJEL SPACEPORT LANDING DANGER NIGHT
LANDING PREFERABLE COORDINATES MAP 46 J92 MN75 REMOTE
YOUR SHIP VION WILL MEET END END END

Dropping into the darkness was safe enough. It was done on instruments, and the Disans were thought to have no detection apparatus. The altimeter dials spun backwards to zero and a soft vibration was the only indication they had landed. All of the cabin lights were off except for the fluorescent glow of the instruments. A white-speckled grey filled the infrared screen, radiation from the still warm sand and stone. There were no moving blips on it, not the characteristic shape of a shielded atomic generator.

"We're here first," Ihjel said, opaqueing the ports and turning on the cabin lights. They blinked at each other, faces damp with perspiration.

"Must you have the ship this hot?" Lea asked, patting her forehead with an already sodden kerchief. Stripped of her heavier clothing, she looked even tinier to Brion. But the thin cloth tunic—reaching barely halfway to her knees

—concealed very little. Small she may have appeared to him: unfeminine she was not. Her breasts were full and high, her waist tiny enough to offset the outward curve of her hips.

"Shall I turn around so you can stare at the back too?" she asked Brion. Five days' experience had taught him that this type of remark was best ignored. It only became worse if he tried to make an intelligent answer.

"Dis is hotter than this cabin," he said, changing the subject. "By raising the interior temperature we can at least prevent any sudden shock when we go out —"

"I know the theory—but it doesn't stop me from sweating," she said curtly.

"Best thing you can do is sweat." Ihjel said. He looked like a glistening captive balloon in shorts. Finishing a bottle of beer, he took another from the freezer. "Have a beer."

"No, thank you. I'm afraid it would dissolve the last shreds of tissue and my kidneys would float completely away. On Earth we never—"

"Get Professor Morees' luggage for her," Ihjel interrupted. "Vion's coming, there's his signal. I'm sending this ship up before any of the locals spot it."

When he cracked the outer port the puff of air struck them like the exhaust from a furnace, dry and hot as a tongue of flame. Brion heard Lea's gasp in the darkness. She stumbled down the ramp and he followed her slowly, careful of the weight of packs and equipment he carried. The sand, still hot from the day, burned through his boots. Ihjel came last, the remote-control unit in his hand. As soon as they were clear he activated it and the ramp slipped back like a giant tongue. As soon as the lock had swung shut, the ship lifted and drifted upwards silently towards its orbit, a shrinking darkness against the stars.

There was just enough starlight to see the sandy wastes around them, as wave-filled as a petrified sea. The dark shape of a sand car drew up over a dune and hummed to a stop. When the door opened Ihjel stepped towards it and everything happened at once.

Ihjel broke into a blue nimbus of crackling flame, his skin blackening, charred. He was dead in an instant. A second pillar of flame bloomed next to the car, and a choking scream was cut off at the moment it began. Ihjel died silently.

Brion was diving even as the electrical discharges still crackled in the air. The boxes and packs dropped from him and he slammed against Lea, knocking her to the ground. He hoped she had the sense to stay there and be quiet. This was his only conscious thought, the rest was reflex. He was rolling over and over as fast as he could.

The spitting electrical flames flared again, playing over the bundles of luggage he had dropped. This time Brion was expecting it, pressed flat on the ground a short distance away. He was facing the darkness away from the sand car and saw the brief, blue glow of the ion-rifle discharge. His own gun was in his hand. When Ihjel had given him the missile weapon he had asked no

questions, but had just strapped it on. There had been no thought that he would need it this quickly. Holding it firmly before him in both hands, he let his body aim at the spot where the glow had been. A whiplash of explosive slugs ripped the night air. They found their target and something thrashed voicelessly and died.

In the brief instant after he fired, a jarring weight landed on his back and a line of fire circled his throat. Normally he fought with a calm mind, with no thoughts other than of the contest. But Ihjel, a friend, a man of Anvhar, had died a few seconds before, and Brion found himself welcoming this physical violence and pain.

There are many foolish and dangerous things that can be done, such as smoking next to high-octane fuel and putting fingers into electrical sockets. Just as dangerous, and equally deadly, is physically attacking a Winner of the Twenties.

Two men hit Brion together, though this made very little difference. The first died suddenly as hands like steel claws found his neck and in a single spasmodic contraction did such damage to the large blood vessels there that they burst and tiny hemorrhages filled his brain. The second man had time for a single scream, though he died just as swiftly when those hands closed on his larynx.

Running in a crouch, partially on his knuckles, Brion swiftly made a circle of the area, gun ready. There were no others. Only when he touched the softness of Lea's body did the blood anger seep from him. He was suddenly aware of the pain and fatigue, the sweat soaking his body and the breath rasping in his throat. Holstering the gun, he ran light fingers over her skull, finding a bruised spot on one temple. Her chest was rising and falling regularly. She had struck her head when he pushed her. It had undoubtedly saved her life.

Sitting down suddenly, he let his body relax, breathing deeply. Everything was a little better now, except for the pain at his throat. His fingers found a thin strand on the side of his neck with a knobby weight on the end. There was another weight on his other shoulder and a thin line of pain across his neck. When he pulled on them both, the strangler's cord came away in his hand. It was thin fiber, strong as a wire. When it had been pulled around his neck it had sliced the surface skin and flesh like a knife, halted only by the corded bands of muscle below. Brion threw it from him, into the darkness where it had come from.

He could think again, and he carefully kept his thoughts from the men he had killed. Knowing it was useless, he went to Ihjel's body. A single touch of the scorched flesh was enough. Behind him Lea moaned with returning consciousness and he hurried on to the sand car, stepping over the charred body outside the door. The driver slumped, dead, killed perhaps by the same strangling cord that had sunk into Brion's throat. He laid the man gently on the sand and closed the lids over the staring horror of the eyes. There was a

canteen in the car and he brought it back to Lea.

"My head—I've hurt my head," she said groggily.

"Just a bruise," he reassured her. "Drink some of this water and you'll soon feel better. Lie back. Everything's over for the moment and you can rest."

"Ihjel's dead!" Lea said with sudden shocked memory. "They've killed him! What's happened?" she tensed, tried to rise, and he pressed her back gently.

"I'll tell you everything. Just don't try to get up yet. There was an ambush and they killed Vion and the driver of the sand car, as well as Ihjel. Three men did it and they're all dead now too. I don't think there are any more around, but if there are I'll hear them coming. We're just going to wait a few minutes until you feel better, then we're getting out of here in the car."

"Bring the ship down!" There was a thin note of hysteria in her voice. "We can't stay here alone. We don't know where to go or what to do. With Ihjel dead, the whole thing's spoiled. We have to get out...."

There are some things that can't sound gentle, no matter how gently they are said. This was one of them. "I'm sorry, Lea, but the ship is out of our reach right now. Ihjel was killed with an ion gun and it fused the control unit into a solid lump. We must take the car and get to the city. We'll do it now. See if you can stand up—I'll help you."

She rose, not saying anything, and as they walked towards the car a single, reddish moon cleared the hills behind them. In its light Brion saw a dark line bisecting the rear panel of the sand car. He stopped abruptly. "What's the matter?" Lea asked.

The unlocked engine cover could have only one significance and he pushed it open, knowing in advance what he would see. The attackers had been very thorough and fast. In the short time available to them they had killed the driver and the car as well. Ruddy light shone on torn wires, ripped out connections. Repair would be impossible.

"I think we'll have to walk," he told her, trying to keep the gloom out of his voice. "This spot is roughly a hundred and fifty kilometres from the city of Hovedstad, where we have to go. We should be able to—"

"We're going to die. We can't walk anywhere. This whole planet is a death trap. Let's get back in the ship!" The shrillness of hysteria was at the edge of her voice, as well as a subtle slurring of sounds.

Brion didn't try to reason with her or bother to explain. She had a concussion from the blow, that much was obvious. He had her sit and rest while he made what preparations he could for the long walk.

Clothing first. With each passing minute the desert air was growing colder as the day's heat ebbed away. Lea was beginning to shiver, and he took some heavier clothing from her charred bag and made her pull it on over her light tunic. There was little else that was worth carrying—the canteen from the car and a first-aid kit he found in one of the compartments. There were no maps and no radio. Navigation was obviously done by compass on this almost featureless desert. The car was equipped with an electrically operated

gyrocompass, of no use to him now. But he did use it to check the direction of Hovedstad, as he remembered it from the map, and found it lined up perfectly with the tracks the car had cut into the sand. It had come directly from the city. They could find their way by back-tracking.

Time was slipping away. He would have liked to bury Ihjel and the men from the car, but the night hours were too valuable to be wasted. The best he could do was put the three corpses in the car, for protection from the Disan animals. He locked the door and threw the key as far as he could into the blackness. Lea had slipped into a restless sleep and he carefully shook her awake.

"Come," Brion said. "We have a little walking to do."

VII

With the cool air and firmly packed sand under foot, walking should have been easy. Lea spoiled that. The concussion seemed to have temporarily cut off the reasoning part of her brain, leaving a direct connection to her vocal cords. As she stumbled along, only half conscious, she mumbled all of her darkest fears that were better left unvoiced. Occasionally there was relevancy in her complaints. They would lose their way, never find the city, die of thirst, freezing, heat or hunger. Interspersed and entwined with these were fears from her past that still floated, submerged in the timeless ocean of her subconscious. Some Brion could understand, though he tried not to listen. Fears of losing credits, not getting the highest grade, falling behind, a woman alone in a world of men, leaving school, being lost, trampled among the nameless hordes that struggled for survival in the crowded city-states of Earth.

There were other things she was afraid of that made no sense to a man of Anvhar. Who were the alkians that seemed to trouble her? Or what was canceri? Daydle and haydle? Who was Manstan, whose name kept coming up, over and over, each time accompanied by a little moan?

Brion stopped and picked her up in both arms. With a sigh she settled against the hard width of his chest and was instantly asleep. Even with the additional weight he made better time now, and he stretched to his fastest, kilometre-consuming stride to make good use of these best hours.

Somewhere on a stretch of gravel and shelving rock he lost the track of the sand car. He wasted no time looking for it. By carefully watching the glistening stars rise and set he had made a good estimate of the geographic north. Dis didn't seem to have a pole star; however, a boxlike constellation turned slowly around the invisible point of the pole. Keeping this positioned in line with his right shoulder guided him on the westerly course he needed.

When his arms began to grow tired he lowered Lea gently to the ground; she didn't wake. Stretching for an instant, before taking up his burden again, Brion was struck by the terrible loneliness of the desert. His breath made a vanishing mist against the stars; all else was darkness and silence. How distant he was from his home, his people, his planet! Even the constellations of the night sky were different. He was used to solitude, but this was a loneliness that touched some deep-buried instinct. A shiver that wasn't from the desert cold touched lightly along his spine, prickling at the hairs on his neck.

It was time to go on. He shrugged the disquieting sensations off and carefully tied Lea into the jacket he had been wearing. Slung like a pack on his back, it made the walking easier. The gravel gave way to sliding dunes of sand that seemed to continue to infinity. It was a painful, slipping climb to the

top of each one, then an equally difficult descent to the black-pooled hollow at the foot of the next.

With the first lightening of the sky in the east he stopped, breath rasping in his chest, to mark his direction before the stars faded. One line scratched in the sand pointed due north, a second pointed out the course they should follow. When they were aligned to his satisfaction he washed his mouth out with a single swallow of water and sat on the sand next to the still form of the girl.

Gold fingers of fire searched across the sky, wiping out the stars. It was magnificent; Brion forgot his fatigue in appreciation. There should be some way of preserving it. A quatrain would be best. Short enough to be remembered, yet requiring attention and skill to compact everything into it. He had scored high with his quatrains in the Twenties. This would be a special one. Taind, his poetry mentor, would have to get a copy.

"What are you mumbling about?" Lea asked, looking up at the craggy blackness of his profile against the reddening sky.

"Poem," he said. "Shhh. Just a minute."

It was too much for Lea, coming after the tension and dangers of the night. She began to laugh, laughing even harder when he scowled at her. Only when she heard the tinge of growing hysteria did she make an attempt to break off the laughter. The sun cleared the horizon, washing a sudden warmth over them. Lea gasped.

"Your throat's been cut! You're bleeding to death!"

"Not really," he said, touching his fingertips lightly against the blood-clotted wound that circled his neck. "Just superficial."

Depression sat on him as he suddenly remembered the battle and death of the previous night. Lea didn't notice his face; she was busy digging in the pack he had thrown down. He had to use his fingers to massage and force away the grimace of pain that twisted his mouth. Memory was more painful than the wound. How easily he had killed! Three men. How close to the surface of the civilized man the animal dwelled! In countless matches he had used those holds, always drawing back from the exertion of the full killing power. They were part of a game, part of the Twenties. Yet when his friend had been killed he had become a killer himself. He believed in nonviolence and the sanctity of life—until the first test, when he had killed without hesitation. More ironic was the fact he really felt no guilt, even now. Shock at the change, yes. But no more than that.

"Lift your chin," Lea said, brandishing the antiseptic applicator she had found in the medicine kit. He lifted his chin obligingly and the liquid drew a cool, burning line across his neck. Antibio pills would do a lot more good, since the wound was completely clotted by now, but he didn't speak his thoughts aloud. For the moment Lea had forgotten herself in taking care of him. He put some of the antiseptic on her scalp bruise and she squeaked, pulling back. They both swallowed the pills.

"That sun is hot already," Lea said, peeling off her heavy clothing. "Let's find a nice cool cave or an air-cooled saloon to crawl into for the day."

"I don't think there are any here. Just sand. We have to walk—"

"I know we have to walk," she interrupted. "There's no need for a lecture about it. You're as seriously cubical as the Bank of Terra. Relax. Count ten and start again." Lea was making empty talk while she listened to the memory of hysteria tittering at the fringes of her brain.

"No time for that. We have to keep going." Brion climbed slowly to his feet after stowing everything in the pack. When he sighted along his marker at the western horizon he saw nothing to mark their course, only the marching dunes. He helped Lea to her feet and began walking slowly towards them.

"Just hold on a second," Lea called after him. "Where do you think you're going?"

"In that direction," he said, pointing. "I hoped there would be some landmarks, but there aren't. We'll have to keep on by dead reckoning. The sun will keep us pretty well on course. If we aren't there by night the stars will be a better guide."

"All this on an empty stomach? How about breakfast? I'm hungry—and thirsty."

"No food." He shook the canteen that gurgled emptily. It had been only partly filled when he found it. "The water's low and we'll need it later."

"I need it now," she said shortly. "My mouth tastes like an unemptied ashtray and I'm dry as paper."

"Just a single swallow," he said after the briefest hesitation. "This is all we have."

Lea sipped at it with her eyes closed in appreciation. Then he sealed the top and returned it to the pack without taking any himself. They were sweating as they started up the first dune.

The desert was barren of life; they were the only things moving under that merciless sun. Their shadows pointed the way ahead of them, and as the shadows shortened the heat rose. It had an intensity Lea had never experienced before, a physical weight that pushed at her with a searing hand. Her clothing was sodden with perspiration, and it trickled burning into her eyes. The light and heat made it hard to see, and she leaned on the immovable strength of Brion's arm. He walked on steadily, apparently ignoring the heat and discomfort.

"I wonder if those things are edible—or store water?" Brion's voice was a harsh rasp. Lea blinked and squinted at the leathery shape on the summit of the dune. Plant or animal, it was hard to tell. It was the size of a man's head, wrinkled and grey as dried-out leather, knobbed with thick spikes. Brion pushed it up with his toe and they had a brief glimpse of a white roundness, like a shiny taproot, going down into the dune. Then the thing contracted, pulling itself lower into the sand. At the same instant something thin and sharp lashed out through a fold in the skin, striking at Brion's boot and

withdrawing. There was a scratch on the hard plastic, beaded with drops of green liquid.

"Probably poison," he said, digging his toe into the sand. "This thing is too mean to fool with—without a good reason. Let's keep going."

It was before noon when Lea fell down. She really wanted to go on, but her body wouldn't obey. The thin soles of her shoes were no protection against the burning sand and her feet were lumps of raw pain. Heat hammered down, poured up from the sand and swirled her in an oven of pain. The air she gasped in was molten metal that dried and cracked her mouth. Each pulse of her heart throbbed blood to the wound in her scalp until it seemed her skull would burst with the agony. She had stripped down to the short tunic—in spite of Brion's insistence that she keep her body protected from the sun—and that clung to her, soaked with sweat. She tore at it in a desperate effort to breathe. There was no escape from the unending heat.

Though the baked sand burned torture into her knees and hands, she couldn't rise. It took all her strength not to fall further. Her eyes closed and everything swirled in immense circles.

Brion, blinking through slitted eyes, saw her go down. He lifted her, and carried her again as he had the night before. The hot touch of her body shocked his bare arms. Her skin was flushed pink. The tunic was torn open and one pointed breast rose and fell unevenly with the irregularity of her breathing. Wiping his palm free of sweat and sand, he touched her skin and felt the ominous hot dryness.

Heat-shock, all the symptoms. Dry, flushed skin, the ragged breathing. Her temperature rising quickly as her body stopped fighting the heat and succumbed.

There was nothing he could do here to protect her from the heat. He measured a tiny portion of the remaining water into her mouth and she swallowed convulsively. Her thin clothing was little protection from the sun. He could only take her in his arms and keep on towards the horizon. An outcropping of rock threw a tiny patch of shade and he walked towards it.

The ground here, shielded from the direct rays of the sun, felt almost cool by contrast. Lea opened her eyes when he put her down, peering up at him through a haze of pain. She wanted to apologize to him for her weakness, but no words came from the dried membrane of her throat. His body above her seemed to swim back and forth in the heat waves, swaying like a tree in a high wind.

Shock drove her eyes open, cleared her mind for an instant. He really was swaying. Suddenly she realized how much she had come to depend on the unending solidity of his strength—and now it was failing. All over his body the corded muscles contracted in ridges, striving to keep him erect. She saw his mouth pulled open by the taut cords of his neck, and the gaping, silent scream was more terrible than any sound. Then she herself screamed as his eyes rolled back, leaving only the empty white of the eyeballs staring terribly

at her. He went over, back, down, like a felled tree, thudding heavily on the sand. Unconscious or dead, she couldn't tell. She pulled limply at his leg, but couldn't drag his immense weight into the shade.

Brion lay on his back in the sun, sweating. Lea saw this and knew that he was still alive. Yet what was happening? She groped for memory in the red haze of her mind, but could remember nothing from her medical studies that would explain this. On every square inch of his body the sweat glands seethed with sudden activity. From every pore oozed great globules of oily liquid, far thicker than normal perspiration. Brion's arms rippled with motion and Lea gaped, horrified as the hairs there writhed and stirred as though endowed with separate life. His chest rose and fell rapidly, deep, gasping breaths racking his body. Lea could only stare through the dim redness of unreality and wonder if she was going mad before she died.

A coughing fit broke the rhythm of his rasping breath, and when it was over his breathing was easier. The perspiration still covered his body, the individual beads touching and forming tiny streams that trickled down his body and vanished in the sand. He stirred and rolled onto his side, facing her. His eyes were open and normal now as he smiled.

"Didn't mean to frighten you. It caught me suddenly coming at the wrong season and everything. It was a bit of a jar to my system. I'll get you some water now—there's still a bit left."

"What happened? When you looked like that, when you fell..."

"Take two swallows, no more," he said, holding the open canteen to her mouth. "Just summer change, that's all. It happens to us every year on Anvhar—only not that violently, of course. In the winter our bodies store a layer of fat under the skin for insulation, and sweating almost ceases completely. There are a lot of internal changes too. When the weather warms up the process is reversed. The fat is metabolized and the sweat glands enlarge and begin working overtime as the body prepares for two months of hard work, heat and little sleep. I guess the heat here triggered off the summer change early."

"You mean—you've adapted to this terrible planet?"

"Just about. Though it does feel a little warm. I'll need a lot more water soon, so we can't remain here. Do you think you can stand the sun if I carry you?"

"No, but I won't feel any better staying here." She was light-headed, scarcely aware of what she said. "Keep going, I guess. Keep going."

As soon as she was out of the shadow of the rock the sunlight burst over her again in a wave of hot pain. She fell unconscious at once. Brion picked her up and staggered forward. After a few yards, he began to feel the pull of the sand. He knew he was reaching the end of his strength. He went more slowly and each dune seemed a bit higher than the one before. Giant, sand-scoured rocks pushed through the dunes here and he had to stumble around them. At the base of the largest of these monoliths was a straggling clump of knotted

vegetation. He passed it by—then stopped as something tried to penetrate his heat-crazed mind. What was it? A difference. Something about these plants that he hadn't noticed in any of the others he had passed during the day.

It was almost like defeat to turn and push his clumsy feet backwards in his own footprints; to stand blinking helplessly at the plants. Yet they were important. Some of them had been cut off close to the sand. Not broken by any natural cause, but cut sharply and squarely by a knife or blade of some sort. The cut plants were long dried and dead, but a tiny hope flared up in him. This was the first sign that other people were actually alive on this heat-blasted planet. And whatever the plants had been cut for, they might be of aid to him. Food—perhaps drink. His hands trembled at the thought as he dropped Lea heavily into the shade of the rock. She didn't stir.

His knife was sharp, but most of the strength was gone from his hands. Breath rasping in his dried throat, he sawed at the tough stem, finally cutting it through. Raising up the shrub, he saw a thick liquid dripping from the severed end. He braced his hand against his leg, so it wouldn't shake and spill, until his cupped palm was full of sap.

It was wet, even a little cool as it evaporated. Surely it was mostly life-giving water. He had a moment's misgiving as he raised it to his lips, and instead of drinking it merely touched it with the tip of his tongue.

At first nothing—then a searing pain. It stabbed deep into his throat and choked him. His stomach heaved and he vomited bitter bile. On his knees, fighting the waves of pain, he lost body fluid he vitally needed.

Despair was worse than the pain. The plant juice must have some use; there must be a way of purifying it or neutralizing it. But Brion, a stranger on this planet, would be dead long before he found out how to do this.

Weakened by the cramps that still tore at him, he tried not to realize how close to the end he was. Getting the girl on his back seemed an impossible task, and for an instant he was tempted to leave her there. Yet even as he considered this he shouldered her leaden weight and once more went on. Each footstep an effort, he followed his own track up the dune. Painfully he forced his way to the top, and looked at the Disan standing a few feet away.

They were both too surprised by the sudden encounter to react at once. For a breath of time they stared at each other, unmoving. When they reacted it was the same defense of fear. Brion dropped the girl, bringing the gun up from the holster in the return of the same motion. The Disan jerked a belled tube from his waistband and raised it to his mouth.

Brion didn't fire. A dead man had taught him how to train his empathetic sense, and to trust it. In spite of the fear that wanted him to jerk the trigger, a different sense read the unvoiced emotions of the native Disan. There was fear there, and hatred. Welling up around these was a strong desire not to commit violence, this time, to communicate instead. Brion felt and recognized all this in a fraction of a second. He had to act instantly to avoid a tragic happening. A jerk of his wrist threw the gun to one side.

As soon as it was gone he regretted its loss. He was gambling their lives on an ability he still was not sure of. The Disan had the tube to his mouth when the gun hit the ground. He held the pose, unmoving, thinking. Then he accepted Brion's action and thrust the tube back into his waistband.

"Do you have any water?" Brion asked, the guttural Disan words hurting his throat.

"I have water," the man said. He still didn't move. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"We're from offplanet. We had ... an accident. We want to go to the city. The water."

The Disan looked at the unconscious girl and made his decision. Over one shoulder he wore one of the green objects that Brion remembered from the solido. He pulled it off and the thing writhed slowly in his hands. It was alive—a green length a metre long, like a noded section of a thick vine. One end flared out into a petal-like formation. The Disan took a hook-shaped object from his waist and thrust it into the petaled orifice. When he turned the hook in a quick motion the length of green writhed and curled around his arm. He pulled something small and dark out and threw it to the ground, extending the twisting green shape towards Brion. "Put your mouth to the end and drink," he said.

Lea needed the water more, but he drank first, suspicious of the living water source. A hollow below the writhing petals was filling with straw-colored water from the fibrous, reedy interior. He raised it to his mouth and drank. The water was hot and tasted swampy. Sudden sharp pains around his mouth made him jerk the thing away. Tiny glistening white barbs projected from the petals pink-tipped now with his blood. Brion swung towards the Disan angrily—and stopped when he looked at the other man's face. His mouth was surrounded by many small white scars.

"The *vaede* does not like to give up its water, but it always does," the man said.

Brion drank again, then put the *vaede* to Lea's mouth. She moaned without regaining consciousness, her lips seeking reflexively for the life-saving liquid. When she was satisfied Brion gently drew the barbs from her flesh and drank again. The Disan hunkered down on his heels and watched them expressionlessly. Brion handed back the *vaede*, then held some of the clothes so that Lea was in their shade. He settled to the same position as the native and looked closely at him.

Squatting immobile on his heels, the Disan appeared perfectly comfortable under the flaming sun. There was no trace of perspiration on his naked, browned skin. Long hair fell to his shoulders, and startlingly blue eyes stared back at Brion from deepset sockets. The heavy kilt around his loins was the only garment he wore. Once more the *vaede* rested over his shoulder, still stirring unhappily. Around his waist was the same collection of leather, stone and brass objects that had been in the solido. Two of them now had meaning

to Brion: the tube-and-mouthpiece, a blowgun of some kind; and the specially shaped hook for opening the vaede. He wondered if the other strangely formed things had equally practical functions. If you accepted them as artifacts with a purpose—not barbaric decorations—you had to accept their owner as something more than the crude savage he resembled.

"My name is Brion. And you—"

"You may not have my name. Why are you here? To kill my people?"

Brion forced away the memory of last night. Killing was just what he had done. Some expectancy in the man's manner, some sensed feeling of hope prompted Brion to speak the truth.

"I'm here to stop your people from being killed. I believe in the end of the war."

"Prove it."

"Take me to the Cultural Relationships Foundations in the city and I'll prove it. I can do nothing here in the desert. Except die."

For the first time there was emotion on the Disan's face. He frowned and muttered something to himself. There was a fine beading of sweat above his eyebrows now as he fought an internal battle. Coming to a decision, he rose, and Brion stood too.

"Come with me. I'll take you to Hovedstad. But first you will tell me—are you from Nyjord?"

"No."

The nameless Disan merely grunted and turned away. Brion shouldered Lea's unconscious body and followed him. They walked for two hours, the Disan setting a cruel pace, before they reached a wasteland of jumbled rock. The native pointed to the highest tower of sand-eroded stone. "Wait near this," he said. "Someone will come for you." He watched while Brion placed the girl's still body in the shade, and passed over the vaede for the last time. Just before leaving he turned back, hesitating.

"My name is ... Ulv," he said. Then he was gone.

Brion did what he could to make Lea comfortable, but it was very little. If she didn't get medical attention soon she would be dead. Dehydration and shock were uniting to destroy her.

Just before sunset he heard clanking, and the throbbing whine of a sand car's engine coming from the west.

VIII

With each second the noise grew louder, coming their way. The tracks squeaked as the car turned around the rock spire, obviously seeking them out. A large carrier, big as a truck, it stopped before them in a cloud of its own dust and the driver kicked the door open.

"Get in here—and fast!" the man shouted. "You're letting in all the heat." He gunned the engine, ready to kick in the gears, and looked at them irritably.

Ignoring the driver's nervous instructions, Brion carefully placed Lea on the rear seat before he pulled the door shut. The car surged forward instantly, a blast of icy air pouring from the air-cooling vents. It wasn't cold in the vehicle—but the temperature was at least forty degrees lower than the outer air. Brion covered Lea with all their extra clothing to prevent any further shock to her system. The driver, hunched over the wheel and driving with an intense speed, hadn't said a word to them since they had entered.

Brion looked up as another man stepped from the engine compartment in the rear of the car. He was thin, harried-looking. And he was pointing a gun.

"Who are you?" he said, without a trace of warmth in his voice.

It was a strange reception, but Brion was beginning to realize that Dis was a strange planet. The other man chewed at his lip nervously while Brion sat, relaxed and unmoving. He didn't want to startle him into pulling the trigger, and he kept his voice pitched low as he answered.

"My name is Brandd. We landed from space two nights ago and have been walking in the desert ever since. Now don't get excited and shoot the gun when I tell you this—but both Vion and Ihjel are dead."

The man with the gun gasped, his eyes widened. The driver threw a single frightened look over his shoulder, then turned quickly back to the wheel. Brion's probe had hit its mark. If these men weren't from the Cultural Relationships Foundation they at least knew a lot about it. It seemed safe to assume they were C.R.F. men.

"When they were shot the girl and I escaped. We were trying to reach the city and contact you. You are from the Foundation, aren't you?"

"Yes. Of course," the man said, lowering the gun. He stared glassy-eyed into space for a moment, nervously working his teeth against his lip. Startled at his own inattention, he raised the gun again.

"If you're Brandd, there's something I want to know." Rummaging in his breast pocket with his free hand, he brought out a yellow message form. He

moved his lips as he reread the message. "Now answer me—if you can—what are the last three events in the ..." He took a quick look at the paper again. "... in the Twenties?"

"Chess finals, rifle prone position, and fencing playoffs. Why?"

The man grunted and slid the pistol back into its holder, satisfied. "I'm Faussel," he said, and waved the message at Brion. "This is Ihjel's last will and testament, relayed to us by the Nyjord blockade control. He thought he was going to die and he sure was right. Passed on his job to you. You're in charge. I was Mervv's second-in-command, until he was poisoned. I was supposed to work for Ihjel, and now I guess I'm yours. At least until tomorrow, when we'll have everything packed and get off this hell planet."

"What do you mean, tomorrow?" Brion asked. "It's three days to deadline and we still have a job to do."

Faussel had dropped heavily into one of the seats and he sprang to his feet again, clutching the seat back to keep his balance in the swaying car.

"Three days, three weeks, three minutes—what difference does it make?" His voice rose shrilly with each word, and he had to make a definite effort to master himself before he could go on. "Look. You don't know anything about this. You just arrived and that's your bad luck. My bad luck is being assigned to this death trap and watching the depraved and filthy things the natives do. And trying to be polite to them even when they are killing my friends, and those Nyjord bombers up there with their hands on the triggers. One of those bombardiers is going to start thinking about home and about the cobalt bombs down here and he's going to press that button, deadline or no deadline."

"Sit down, Faussel. Sit down and take a rest." There was sympathy in Brion's voice—but also the firmness of an order. Faussel swayed for a second longer, then collapsed. He sat with his cheek against the window, eyes closed. A pulse throbbed visibly in his temple and his lips worked. He had been under too much tension for too long a time.

This was the atmosphere that hung heavily in the air at the C.R.F. building when they arrived. Despair and defeat. The doctor was the only one who didn't share this mood as he hustled Lea off to the clinic with prompt efficiency. He obviously had enough patients to keep his mind occupied. With the others the feeling of depression was unmistakable. From the instant they had driven through the automatic garage door, Brion had swum in this miasma of defeat. It was omnipresent and hard to ignore.

As soon as he had eaten he went with Faussel into what was to have been Ihjel's office. Through the transparent walls he could see the staff packing the records, crating them for shipment. Faussel seemed less nervous now that he was no longer in command. Brion rejected any idea he had of letting the man know that he himself was only a novice in the foundation. He was going to need all the authority he could muster, since they would undoubtedly hate him for what he was going to do.

"Better take notes of this, Faussel, and have it typed. I'll sign it." The

printed word always carried more weight. "All preparations for leaving are to be stopped at once. Records are to be returned to the files. We are going to stay here just as long as we have clearance from the Nyjorders. If this operation is unsuccessful we will all leave together when the time expires. We will take whatever personal baggage we can carry by hand; everything else stays here. Perhaps you don't realize we are here to save a planet—not file cabinets full of papers."

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Faussel flush with anger. "As soon as that is typed bring it back. And all the reports as to what has been accomplished on this project. That will be all for now."

Faussel stamped out, and a minute later Brion saw the shocked, angry looks from the workers in the outer office. Turning his back to them, he opened the drawers in the desk, one after another. The top drawer was empty, except for a sealed envelope. It was addressed to Winner Ihjel.

Brion looked at it thoughtfully, then ripped it open. The letter inside was handwritten.

Ihjel: I've had the official word that you are on the way to relieve me and I am forced to admit I feel only an intense satisfaction. You've had the experience on these outlaw planets and can get along with the odd types. I have been specializing in research for the last twenty years, and the only reason I was appointed planetary supervisor on Nyjord was because of the observation and application facilities. I'm the research type, not the office type; no one has ever denied that.

You're going to have trouble with the staff, so you had better realize that they are all compulsory volunteers. Half are clerical people from my staff. The others a mixed bag of whoever was close enough to be pulled in on this crash assignment. It developed so fast we never saw it coming. And I'm afraid we've done little or nothing to stop it. We can't get access to the natives here, not in the slightest. It's frightening! They don't fit! I've done Poisson Distributions on a dozen different factors and none of them can be equated. The Pareto Extrapolations don't work. Our field men can't even talk to the natives and two have been killed trying. The ruling class is unapproachable and the rest just keep their mouths shut and walk away.

I'm going to take a chance and try to talk to Lig-magte, perhaps I can make him see sense. I doubt if it will work and there is a chance he will try violence with me. The nobility here are very prone to violence. If I get back all right you won't see this note. Otherwise—good-bye, Ihjel. Try to do a better job than I did.

Aston Mervv

P.S. There is a problem with the staff. They are supposed to be saviors, but without exception they all loathe the Disans. I'm afraid I do too.

Brion ticked off the relevant points in the letter. He had to find some way of discovering what Pareto Extrapolations were—without uncovering his own lack of knowledge. The staff would vanish in five minutes if they knew how

new he was at the job. Poisson Distribution made more sense. It was used in physics as the unchanging probability of an event that would be true at all times. Such as the numbers of particles that would be given off by a lump of radioactive matter during a short period. From the way Mervv used it in his letter it looked as if the societics people had found measurable applications in societies and groups. At least on other planets. None of the rules seemed to be working on Dis. Ihjel had admitted that, and Mervv's death had proven it. Brion wondered who this Lig-magte was who appeared to have killed Mervv.

A forged cough broke through Brion's concentration, and he realized that Faussel had been standing in front of his desk for some minutes. Brion looked up and mopped perspiration from his face.

"Your air conditioner seems to be out of order," Faussel said. "Should I have the mechanic look at it?"

"There's nothing wrong with the machine; I'm just adapting to Dis's climate. What else do you want, Faussel?"

The assistant had a doubting look that he didn't succeed in hiding. He also had trouble believing the literal truth. He placed the small stack of file folders on the desk.

"These are the reports to date, everything we have uncovered about the Disans. It's not very much; but considering the antisocial attitudes on this lousy world it is the best we could do." A sudden thought hit him, and his eyes narrowed slyly. "It can't be helped, but some of the staff have been wondering out loud about that native that contacted us. How did you get him to help you? We've never gotten to first base with these people, and as soon as you land you have one working for you. You can't stop people from thinking about it, you being a newcomer and a stranger. After all, it looks a little odd—" He broke off in midsentence as Brion looked at him in cold fury.

"I can't stop people from thinking about it—but I can stop them from talking. Our job is to contact the Disans and stop this suicidal war. I have done more in one day than you all have done since you arrived. I have accomplished this because I am better at my work than the rest of you. That is all the information any of you are going to receive. You are dismissed."

White with anger, Faussel turned on his heel and stamped out—to spread the word about what a slave-driver the new director was. They would then all hate him passionately, which was just the way he wanted it. He couldn't risk exposure as the tyro he was. And perhaps a new emotion, other than disgust and defeat, might jar them into a little action. They certainly couldn't do any worse than they had been doing.

It was a tremendous amount of responsibility. For the first time since setting foot on this barbaric planet Brion had time to stop and think. He was taking an awful lot upon himself. He knew nothing about this world, nor about the powers involved in the conflict. Here he sat pretending to be in charge of an organization he had first heard about only a few weeks earlier. It was a frightening situation. Should he slide out from under?

There was just one possible answer, and that was *no*. Until he found someone else who could do better, he seemed to be the one best suited for the job. And Ihjel's opinion had to count for something. Brion had felt the surety of the man's conviction that Brion was the only one who might possibly succeed in this difficult spot.

Let it go at that. If he had any qualms it would be best to put them behind him. Aside from everything else, there was a primary bit of loyalty involved. Ihjel had been an Anvharian and a Winner. Maybe it was a provincial attitude to hold in this big universe—Anvhar was certainly far enough away from here—but honor is very important to a man who must stand alone. He had a debt to Ihjel, and he was going to pay it off.

Once the decision had been made, he felt easier. There was an intercom on the desk in front of him and he leaned with a heavy thumb on the button labeled *Faussel*.

"Yes?" Even through the speaker the man's voice was cold with ill-concealed hatred.

"Who is Lig-magte? And did the former director ever return from seeing him?"

"Magte is a title that means roughly noble or lord. Lig-magte is the local overlord. He has an ugly stoneheap of a building just outside the city. He seems to be the mouthpiece for the group of magter that are pushing this idiotic war. As to your second question, I have to answer yes and no. We found Director Mervv's head outside the door next morning with all the skin gone. We knew who it was because the doctor identified the bridgework in his mouth. *Do you understand?*"

All pretense of control had vanished, and Faussel almost shrieked the last words. They were all close to cracking up, if he was any example. Brion broke in quickly.

"That will be all, Faussel. Just get word to the doctor that I would like to see him as soon as I can." He broke the connection and opened the first of the folders. By the time the doctor called he had skimmed the reports and was reading the relevant ones in greater detail. Putting on his warm coat, he went through the outer office. The few workers still on duty turned their backs in frigid silence.

Doctor Stine had a pink and shiny bald head that rose above a thick black beard. Brion had liked him at once. Anyone with enough firmness of mind to keep a beard in this climate was a pleasant exception after what he had met so far.

"How's the new patient, Doctor?"

Stine combed his beard with stubby fingers before answering. "Diagnosis: heat-syncope. Prognosis: complete recovery. Condition fair, considering the dehydration and extensive sunburn. I've treated the burns, and a saline drip is taking care of the other. She just missed going into heat-shock. I have her under sedation now."

"I'd like to have her up and helping me tomorrow morning. Could she do this—with stimulants or drugs?"

"She could—but I don't like it. There might be side factors, perhaps long-standing debilitation. It's a chance."

"A chance we will have to take. In less than seventy hours this planet is due for destruction. In attempting to avert that tragedy I'm expendable, as is everyone else here. Agreed?"

The doctor grunted deep in his beard and looked Brion's immense frame up and down. "Agreed," he said, almost happily. "It is a distinct pleasure to see something beside black defeat around here. I'll go along with you."

"Well, you can help me right now. I checked the personnel roster and discovered that out of the twenty-eight people working here there isn't a physical scientist of any kind—other than yourself."

"A scruffy bunch of button-pushers and theoreticians. Not worth a damn for field work, the whole bunch of them!" The doctor toed the floor switch on a waste receptacle and spat into it with feeling.

"Then I'm going to depend on you for some straight answers," Brion said. "This is an un-standard operation, and the standard techniques just don't begin to make sense. Even Poisson Distributions and Pareto Extrapolations don't apply here." Stine nodded agreement and Brion relaxed a bit. He had just relieved himself of his entire knowledge of societics, and it had sounded authentic. "The more I look at it the more I believe that this is a physical problem, something to do with the exotic and massive adjustments the Disans have made to this hellish environment. Could this tie up in any way with their absolutely suicidal attitude towards the cobalt bombs?"

"Could it? Could it?" Dr. Stine paced the floor rapidly on his stocky legs, twining his fingers behind his back. "You are bloody well right it could. Someone is thinking at last and not just punching bloody numbers into a machine and sitting and scratching his behind while waiting for the screen to light up with the answers. Do you know how Disans exist?" Brion shook his head. "The fools here think it disgusting but I call it fascinating. They have found ways to join a symbiotic relationship with the life forms on this planet. Even a parasitic relationship. You must realize that living organisms will do anything to survive. Castaways at sea will drink their own urine in their need for water. Disgust at this is only the attitude of the overprotected who have never experienced extreme thirst or hunger. Well, here on Dis you have a planet of castaways."

Stine opened the door of the pharmacy. "This talk of thirst makes me dry." With economically efficient motions he poured grain alcohol into a beaker, thinned it with distilled water and flavored it with some crystals from a bottle. He filled two glasses and handed Brion one. It didn't taste bad at all.

"What do you mean by parasitic, Doctor? Aren't we all parasites of the lower life forms? Meat animals, vegetables and such?"

"No, no—you miss the point! I speak of parasitic in the exact meaning of

the word. You must realize that to a biologist there is no real difference between parasitism, symbiosis, mutualism, biontergasy, commensalism—"

"Stop, stop!" Brion said. "Those are just meaningless sounds to me. If that is what makes this planet tick I'm beginning to see why the rest of the staff has that lost feeling."

"It is just a matter of degree of the same thing. Look. You have a kind of crustacean living in the lakes here, very much like an ordinary crab. It has large claws in which it holds anemones, tentacled sea animals with no power of motion. The crustacean waves these around to gather food, and eats the pieces they capture that are too big for them. This is biontergasy, two creatures living and working together, yet each capable of existing alone.

"Now, this same crustacean has a parasite living under its shell, a degenerated form of a snail that has lost all powers of movement. A true parasite that takes food from its host's body and gives nothing in return. Inside this snail's gut there is a protozoan that lives off the snail's ingested food. Yet this little organism is not a parasite, as you might think at first, but a symbiote. It takes food from the snail, but at the same time it secretes a chemical that aids the snail's digestion of the food. Do you get the picture? All these life forms exist in a complicated interdependence."

Brion frowned in concentration, sipping at the drink. "It's making some kind of sense now. Symbiosis, parasitism and all the rest are just ways of describing variations of the same basic process of living together. And there is probably a grading and shading between some of these that make the exact relationship hard to define."

"Precisely. Existence is so difficult on this world that the competing forms have almost died out. There are still a few left, preying off the others. It was the cooperating and interdependent life forms that really won out in the race for survival. I say life forms with intent. The creatures here are mostly a mixture of plant and animal, like the lichens you have elsewhere. The Disans have a creature they call a "vaede" that they use for water when traveling. It has rudimentary powers of motion from its animal part, yet uses photosynthesis and stores water like a plant. When the Disans drink from it the thing taps their blood streams for food elements."

"I know," Brion said wryly. "I drank from one. You can see my scars. I'm beginning to comprehend how the Disans fit into the physical pattern of their world, and I realize it must have all kinds of psychological effects on them. Do you think this has any effect on their social organization?"

"An important one. But maybe I'm making too many suppositions now. Perhaps your researchers upstairs can tell you better; after all, this is their field."

Brion had studied the reports on the social setup and not one word of them made sense. They were a solid maze of unknown symbols and cryptic charts. "Please continue, Doctor," he insisted. "The societics reports are valueless so far. There are factors missing. You are the only one I have talked to so far

who can give me any intelligent reports or answers."

"All right then—be it on your own head. The way I see it, you've got no society here at all, just a bunch of rugged individualists. Each one for himself, getting nourishment from the other life forms of the planet. If they have a society, it is orientated towards the rest of the planetary life—instead of towards other human beings. Perhaps that's why your figures don't make sense. They are set up for the human societies. In their relations with each other, these people are completely different."

"What about the magter, the upper-class types who build castles and are causing all this trouble?"

"I have no explanation," Dr. Stine admitted. "My theories hold water and seem logical enough up to this point. But the magter are the exception, and I have no idea why. They are completely different from the rest of the Disans. Argumentative, blood-thirsty, looking for planetary conquest instead of peace. They aren't rulers, not in the real sense. They hold power because nobody else wants it. They grant mining concessions to offworlders because they are the only ones with a sense of property. Maybe I'm going out on a limb. But if you can find out *why* they are so different you may be onto the clue to our difficulties."

For the first time since his arrival Brion began to feel a touch of enthusiasm. Plus a sense of the remote possibility that there might even be a solution to the deadly problem. He drained his glass and stood up.

"I hope you'll wake your patient early, Doctor. You might be as interested in talking to her as I am. If what you told me is true, she could well be our key to the answer. She is Professor Lea Morees, and she is just out from Earth with degrees in exobiology and anthropology, and has a head stuffed with vital facts."

"Wonderful!" Stine said. "I shall take care of the head, not only because it is so pretty but because of its knowledge. Though we totter on the edge of atomic destruction I have a strange feeling of optimism—for the first time since I landed on this planet."

IX

The guard inside the front entrance of the Foundation building jumped at the thunderous noise and reached for his gun. He dropped his hand sheepishly when he realized it was only a sneeze—though a gargantuan one. Brion came up, sniffing, huddling down into his coat. "I'm going out before I catch pneumonia," he said. The guard saluted dumbly, and after checking his proximity detector screens he slipped out and the heavy portal thudded shut behind him. The street was still warm from the heat of the day and he sighed happily and opened his coat.

This was partly a reconnaissance trip—and partly a way of getting warmed up. There was little else he could do in the building; the staff had long since retired. He had slept for a half an hour, and had waked refreshed and ready to work. All of the reports he could understand had been read and reread until they were memorized. He could use the time now, while the rest of them were asleep, to get better acquainted with the main city of Dis.

As he walked the dark streets he realized how alien the Disan way of life was to everything he knew. This city—Hovedstad—literally meant "main place" in the native language. And that's all it was. It was only the presence of the offworlders that made it into a city. Building after building, standing deserted, bore the names of mining companies, traders, space transporters. None of them was occupied now. Some still had lights burning, switched on by automatic apparatus, others were as dark as the Disan structures. There weren't many of these native constructions and they seemed out of place among the rammed earth and prefab offworld buildings. Brion examined one that was dimly illuminated by the light on the corner of VEGAN SMELTERS, LTD.

It consisted of a single large room, resting right on the ground. There were no windows, and the whole thing appeared to have been constructed of some sort of woven material plastered with stone-hard mud. Nothing was blocking the door and he was thinking seriously of going in when he became aware that he was being followed.

It was only a slight noise, almost lost in the night. Normally it would never have been noticed, but tonight Brion was listening with his entire body. Someone was behind him, swallowed up in the pools of darkness. Brion shrank back against the wall. There was very little chance this could be anyone but a Disan. He had a sudden memory of Mervv's severed head as it had been discovered outside the door.

Ihjel had helped him train his empathetic sense and he reached out with it. It was difficult working in the dark; he could be sure of nothing. Was he getting a reaction—or just wishing for one? Why did it have a ring of

familiarity to it? A sudden idea struck him.

"Ulv," he said, very softly. "This is Brion." He crouched, ready for any attack.

"I know," a voice said softly in the night. "Do not talk. Walk in the direction you were going before."

Asking questions now would accomplish nothing. Brion turned instantly and did as he was bidden. The buildings grew further apart until he realized from the sand underfoot that he was back in the planet-wide desert. It could be a trap—he hadn't recognized the voice behind the whisper—yet he had to take this chance. A darker shape appeared in the dark night near him, and a burning hot hand touched his arm lightly.

"I will walk ahead. Follow close behind me." The words were louder and this time Brion recognized the voice.

Without waiting for an answer, Ulv turned and his dimly seen shape vanished into the darkness. Brion moved swiftly after him, until they walked side by side over the rolling hills of sand. The sand merged into hard-baked ground, became cracked and scarred with rock-filled gulleys. They followed a deepening gully that grew into a good-sized ravine. When they turned an angle of the ravine Brion saw a weak yellow light coming from an opening in the hard dirt wall.

Ulv dropped on all fours and vanished through the shoulder-wide hole. Brion followed him, trying to ignore the growing tension and unease he felt. Crawling like this, head down, he was terribly vulnerable. He tried to shrug off the feeling, mentally blaming it on tense nerves.

The tunnel was short and opened into a larger chamber. A sudden scuffle of feet sounded at the same instant that a wave of empathetic hatred struck him. It took vital seconds to fight his way out of the trapping tunnel, to roll clear and bring his gun up. During those seconds he should have died. The Disan poised above him had the short-handled stone hammer raised to strike a skull-crushing blow.

Ulv was clutching the man's wrist, fighting silently to keep the hammer from falling. Neither combatant said a word, the rasp of their calloused feet on the sand the only sound. Brion backed away from the struggling men, his gun centered on the stranger. The Disan followed him with burning eyes, and dropped the hammer as soon as it was obvious the attack had failed.

"Why did you bring him here?" he growled at Ulv. "Why didn't you kill him?"

"He is here so we can listen to what he says, Gebk. He is the one I told you of, that I found in the desert."

"We listen to what he says and then we kill him," Gebk said with a mirthless grin. The remark wasn't meant to be humorous, but was made in all seriousness. Brion recognized this and knew that there was no danger for the present moment. He slid the gun away, and for the first time looked around the chamber.

It was domed in shape and was still hot from the heat of the day. Ulv took off the length of cloth he had wrapped around his body against the chill, and refolded it as a kilt, strapping it on under his belt artifacts. He grunted something unintelligible and when a muttered answer came, Brion for the first time became aware of the woman and the child.

The two sat against the far wall, squatting on either side of a heap of fibrous plants. Both were nude, clothed only in the matted hair that fell below their shoulders. The belt of strange tools could not be classified as clothing. Even the child wore a tiny replica of her mother's. Putting down a length of plant she had been chewing, the woman shuffled over to the tiny fire that illuminated the room. A clay pot stood over it, and from this she ladled three bowls of food for the men. It smelled atrocious, and Brion tried not to taste or smell the sickening mixture while he ate it. He used his fingers, as did the other men, and did not talk while he ate. There was no way to tell if the silence was ritual or habit. It gave him a chance for a closer look at the Disan way of living.

The cave was obviously handmade; tool marks could be clearly seen in the hard clay of the walls, except in the portion opposite the entrance. This was covered with a network of roots, rising out of the floor and vanishing into the roof of earth above. Perhaps this was the reason for the cave's existence. The thin roots had been carefully twisted and plaited together until they formed a single swollen root in the center, as thick as a man's arm. From this hung four of the vaedes: Ulv had placed his there before he sat down. The teeth must have instantly sunk in, for it hung unsupported—another link in the Disan life cycle. This appeared to be the source of the vaede's water that nourished the people.

Brion was aware of eyes upon him and turned and smiled at the little girl. She couldn't have been over six years old, but she was already a Disan in every way. She neither returned his smile nor changed her expression, unchildlike in its stolidity. Her hands and jaw never stopped as she worked on the lengths of fibrous plant her mother had placed before her. The child split them with a small tool and removed a pod of some kind. This was peeled—partially by scraping with a different tool, and partially by working between her teeth. It took long minutes to remove the tough rind; the results seemed scarcely worth it. A tiny wriggling object was finally disclosed which the girl instantly swallowed. She then began working on the next pod.

Ulv put down his clay bowl and belched. "I brought you to the city as I told you I would," he said. "Have you done as you said you would?"

"What did he promise?" Gebk asked.

"That he would stop the war. Have you stopped it?"

"I am trying to stop it," Brion said. "But it is not that easy. I'll need some help. It is your life that needs saving—yours and your families'. If you would help me—"

"What is the truth?" Ulv broke in savagely. "All I hear is difference, and

there is no longer any way to tell truth. For as long as always we have done as the magter say. We bring them food and they give us the metal and sometimes water when we need it. As long as we do as they ask they do not kill us. They live the wrong way, but I have had bronze from them for my tools. They have told us that they are getting a world for us from the sky people, and that is good."

"It has always been known that the sky people are evil in every way, and only good can come from killing them," Gebk said.

Brion stared back at the two Disans and their obvious hatred. "Then why didn't you kill me, Ulv?" he asked. "That first time in the desert, or tonight when you stopped Gebk?"

"I could have. But there was something more important. What is the truth? Can we believe as we have always done? Or should we listen to this?"

He threw a small sheet of plastic to Brion, no bigger than the palm of his hand. A metal button was fastened to one corner of the wafer, and a simple drawing was imbedded in the wafer. Brion held it to the light and saw a picture of a man's hand squeezing the button between thumb and forefinger. It was a subminiaturized playback; mechanical pressure on the case provided enough current to play the recorded message. The plastic sheet vibrated, acting as a loudspeaker.

Though the voice was thin and scratchy, the words were clearly audible. It was an appeal for the Disan people not to listen to the magter. It explained that the magter had started a war that could have only one ending—the destruction of Dis. Only if the magter were thrown down and their weapons discovered could there be any hope.

"Are these words true?" Ulv asked.

"Yes," Brion said.

"They are perhaps true," Gebk said, "but there is nothing that we can do. I was with my brother when these word-things fell out of the sky and he listened to one and took it to the magter to ask them. They killed him, as he should have known they would do. The magter kill us if they know we listen to the words."

"And the words tell us we will die if we listen to the magter!" Ulv shouted, his voice cracking. Not with fear, but with frustration at the attempt to reconcile two opposite points of view. Up until this time his world had consisted of black and white values, with very few shadings of difference in between.

"There are things you can do that will stop the war without hurting yourself or the magter," Brion said, searching for a way to enlist their aid.

"Tell us," Ulv grunted.

"There would be no war if the magter could be contacted, made to listen to reason. They are killing you all. You could tell me how to talk to the magter, how I could understand them—"

"No one can talk to the magter," the woman broke in. "If you say something

different they will kill you as they killed Gebk's brother. So they are easy to understand. That is the way they are. They do not change." She put the length of plant she had been softening for the child back into her mouth. Her lips were deeply grooved and scarred from a lifetime of this work, her teeth at the sides worn almost to the bone.

"Mor is right," Ulv said. "You do not talk to magter. What else is there to do?"

Brion looked at the two men before he spoke, and shifted his weight. The motion brought his fingertips just a few inches from his gun. "The magter have bombs that will destroy Nyjord—this is the next planet, a star in your sky. If I can find where the bombs are, I will have them taken away and there will be no war."

"You want to aid the devils in the sky against our own people!" Gebk shouted, half rising. Ulv pulled him back to the ground, but there was no more warmth in his voice as he spoke.

"You are asking too much. You will leave now."

"Will you help me, though? Will you help stop the war?" Brion asked, aware he had gone too far, but unable to stop. Their anger was making them forget the reasons for his being there.

"You ask too much," Ulv said again. "Go back now. We will talk about it."

"Will I see you again? How can I reach you?"

"We will find you if we wish to talk to you," was all Ulv said. If they decided he was lying he would never see them again. There was nothing he could do about it.

"I have made up my mind," Gebk said, rising to his feet and drawing his cloth up until it covered his shoulders. "You are lying and this is all a lie of the sky people. If I see you again I will kill you." He stepped to the tunnel and was gone.

There was nothing more to be said. Brion went out next—checking carefully to be sure that Gebk really had left—and Ulv guided him to the spot where the lights of Hovedstad were visible. He did not speak during their return journey and vanished without a word. Brion shivered in the night chill of the air and wrapped his coat more tightly around himself. Depressed, he walked back towards the warmer streets of the city.

It was dawn when he reached the Foundation building; a new guard was at the front entrance. No amount of hammering or threats could convince the man to open until Faussel came down, yawning and blinking with sleep. He was starting some complaint when Brion cut him off curtly and ordered him to finish dressing and report for work at once. Still feeling elated, Brion hurried into his office and cursed the overly efficient character who had turned on his air conditioner to chill the room again. When he turned it off this time he removed enough vital parts to keep it out of order for the duration.

When Faussel came in he was still yawning behind his fist—obviously a low morning-sugar type. "Before you fall on your face, go out and get some

coffee," Brion said. "Two cups. I'll have a cup too."

"That won't be necessary," Faussel said, drawing himself up stiffly. "I'll call the canteen if you wish some." He said it in the iciest tone he could manage this early in the morning.

In his enthusiasm Brion had forgotten the hate campaign he had directed against himself. "Suit yourself," he said shortly, getting back into the role. "But the next time you yawn there'll be a negative entry in your service record. If that's clear—you can brief me on this organization's visible relations with the Disans. How do they take us?"

Faussel choked and swallowed a yawn. "I believe they look on the C.R.F. people as some species of simpleton, sir. They hate all offworlders; memory of their desertion has been passed on verbally for generations. So by their one-to-one logic we should either hate back or go away. We stay instead. And give them food, water, medicine and artifacts. Because of this they let us remain on sufferance. I imagine they consider us do-gooder idiots, and as long as we cause no trouble they'll let us stay." He was struggling miserably to suppress a yawn, so Brion turned his back and gave him a chance to get it out.

"What about the Nyjorders? How much do they know of our work?" Brion looked out the window at dusty buildings, outlined in purple against the violent colors of the desert sunrise.

"Nyjord is a cooperating planet, and has full knowledge at all executive levels. They are giving us all the aid they can."

"Well, now is the time to ask for more. Can I contact the commander of the blockading fleet?"

"There is a scrambler connection right through to him. I'll set it up." Faussel bent over the desk and punched a number into the phone controls. The screen flowed with the black and white patterns of the scrambler.

"That's all, Faussel," Brion said. "I want privacy for this talk. What's the commander's name?"

"Professor Krafft—he's a physicist. They have no military men at all, so they called him in for the construction of the bombs and energy weapons. He's still in charge." Faussel yawned extravagantly as he went out the door.

The Professor-Commander was very old, with wispy grey hair and a network of wrinkles surrounding his eyes. His image shimmered, then cleared as the scrambler units aligned.

"You must be Brion Brandd," he said. "I have to tell you how sorry we all are that your friend Ihjel and the two others—had to die, after coming so far to help us. I'm sure you are very happy to have had a friend like that."

"Why ... yes, of course," Brion said, reaching for the scattered fragments of his thought processes. It took an effort to remember the first conflict, now that he was worrying about the death of a planet. "It's very kind of you to mention it. But I would like to find out a few things from you, if I could."

"Anything at all; we are at your disposal. Before we begin, though, I shall pass on the thanks of our council for your aid in joining us. Even if we are

eventually forced to drop the bombs, we shall never forget that your organization did everything possible to avert the disaster."

Once again Brion was caught off balance. For an instant he wondered if Krafft was being insincere, then recognized the baseness of this thought. The completeness of the man's humanity was obvious and compelling. The thought passed through Brion's mind that now he had an additional reason for wanting the war ended without destruction on either side. He very much wanted to visit Nyjord and see these people on their home grounds.

Professor Krafft waited, patiently and silently, while Brion pulled his thoughts together and answered. "I still hope that this thing can be stopped in time. That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I want to see Lig-magte and I thought it would be better if I had a legitimate reason. Are you in contact with him?"

Krafft shook his head. "No, not really in contact. When this trouble started I sent him a transceiver so we could talk directly. But he has delivered his ultimatum, speaking for the magter. The only terms he will hear are unconditional surrender. His receiver is on, but he has said that is the only message he will answer."

"Not much chance of him ever being told that," Brion said.

"There was—at one time. I hope you realize, Brion, that the decision to bomb Dis was not easily arrived at. A great many people—myself included—voted for unconditional surrender. We lost the vote by a very small margin."

Brion was getting used to these philosophical body blows and he rolled with the punches now. "Are there any of your people left on this planet? Or do you have any troops I can call on for help? This is still a remote possibility, but if I do find out where the bombs or the launchers are, a surprise raid would knock them out."

"We have no people left in Hovedstad now—all the ones who weren't evacuated were killed. But there are commando teams standing by here to make a landing if the weapons are detected. The Disans must depend on secrecy to protect their armament, since we have both the manpower and the technology to reach any objective. We also have technicians and other volunteers looking for the weapon sites. They have not been successful as yet, and most of them were killed soon after landing."

Krafft hesitated for a moment. "There is another group you should know about; you will need all the factors. Some of our people are in the desert outside of Hovedstad. We do not officially approve of them, though they have a good deal of popular support. They are mostly young men, operating as raiders, killing and destroying with very little compunction. They are attempting to uncover the weapons by sheer strength of arms."

This was the best news yet. Brion controlled his voice and kept his expression calm when he spoke. "I don't know how far I can stretch your cooperation—but could you possibly tell me how to get in touch with them?"

Kraft allowed himself a small smile. "I'll give you the wave length on

which you can reach their radio. They call themselves the 'Nyjord army.' When you talk to them you can do me a favor. Pass on a message. Just to prove things aren't bad enough, they've become a little worse. One of our technical crews has detected jump-space energy transmissions in the planetary crust. The Disans are apparently testing their projector, sooner than we had estimated. Our deadline has been revised by one day. I'm afraid there are only two days left before you must evacuate." His eyes were large with compassion. "I'm sorry. I know this will make your job that much harder."

Brion didn't want to think about the loss of a full day from his already close deadline. "Have you told the Disans this yet?"

"No," Krafft told him. "The decision was reached a few minutes before your call. It is going on the radio to Lig-magte now."

"Can you cancel the transmission and let me take the message in person?"

"I can do that." Krafft thought for a moment. "But it would surely mean your death at their hands. They have no hesitation in killing any of our people. I would prefer to send it by radio."

"If you do that you will be interfering with my plans, and perhaps destroying them under the guise of saving my life. Isn't my life my own—to dispose of as I will?"

For the first time Professor Krafft was upset. "I'm sorry, terribly sorry. I'm letting my concern and worry wash over into my public affairs. Of course you may do as you please; I could never think of stopping you." He turned and said something inaudible offscreen. "The call is cancelled. The responsibility is yours. All our wishes for success go with you. End of transmission."

"End of transmission," Brion said, and the screen went dark.

"Faussel!" he shouted into the intercom. "Get me the best and fastest sand car we have, a driver who knows his way around, and two men who can handle a gun and know how to take orders. We're going to get some positive action at last."

X

"It's suicide," the taller guard grumbled.

"Mine, not yours, so don't worry about it," Brion barked at him. "Your job is to remember your orders and keep them straight. Now—let's hear them again."

The guard rolled his eyes up in silent rebellion and repeated in a toneless voice: "We stay here in the car and keep the motor running while you go inside the stone pile there. We don't let anybody in the car and we try and keep them clear of the car—short of shooting them, that is. We don't come in, no matter what happens or what it looks like, but wait for you here. Unless you call on the radio, in which case we come in with the automatics going and shoot the place up, and it doesn't matter who we hit. This will be done only as a last resort."

"See if you can't arrange that last resort thing," the other guard said, patting the heavy blue barrel of his weapon.

"I meant that *last* resort," Brion said angrily. "If any guns go off without my permission you will pay for it, and pay with your necks. I want that clearly understood. You are here as a rear guard and a base for me to get back to. This is my operation and mine alone—unless I call you in. Understood?"

He waited until all three men had nodded in agreement, then checked the charge on his gun—it was fully loaded. It would be foolish to go in unarmed, but he had to. One gun wouldn't save him. He put it aside. The button radio on his collar was working and had a strong enough signal to get through any number of walls. He took off his coat, threw open the door and stepped out into the searing brilliance of the Disan noon.

There was only the desert silence, broken by the steady throb of the car's motor behind him. Stretching away to the horizon in every direction was the eternal desert of sand. The keep stood nearby, solitary, a massive pile of black rock. Brion plodded closer, watching for any motion from the walls. Nothing stirred. The high-walled, irregularly shaped construction sat in a ponderous silence. Brion was sweating now, only partially from the heat.

He circled the thing, looking for a gate. There wasn't one at ground level. A slanting cleft in the stone could be climbed easily, but it seemed incredible that this might be the only entrance. A complete circuit proved that it was. Brion looked unhappily at the slanting and broken ramp, then cupped his hands and shouted loudly.

"I'm coming up. Your radio doesn't work any more. I'm bringing the message from Nyjord that you have been waiting to hear." This was a slight bending of the truth without fracturing it. There was no answer—just the hiss of wind-blown sand against the rock and the mutter of the car in the

background. He started to climb.

The rock underfoot was crumbling and he had to watch where he put his feet. At the same time he fought a constant impulse to look up, watching for anything falling from above. Nothing happened. When he reached the top of the wall he was breathing hard; sweat moistened his body. There was still no one in sight. He stood on an unevenly shaped wall that appeared to circle the building. Instead of having a courtyard inside it, the wall was the outer face of the structure, the domed roof rising from it. At varying intervals dark openings gave access to the interior. When Brion looked down, the sand car was just a dun-colored bump in the desert, already far behind him.

Stooping, he went through the nearest door. There was still no one in sight. The room inside was something out of a madman's funhouse. It was higher than it was wide, irregular in shape, and more like a hallway than a room. At one end it merged into an incline that became a stairwell. At the other it ended in a hole that vanished in darkness below. Light of sorts filtered in through slots and holes drilled into the thick stone wall. Everything was built of the same crumble-textured but strong rock. Brion took the stairs. After a number of blind passages and wrong turns he saw a stronger light ahead, and went on. There was food, metal, even artifacts of the unusual Disan design in the different rooms he passed through. Yet no people. The light ahead grew stronger, and the last passageway opened and swelled out until it led into the large central chamber.

This was the heart of the strange structure. All the rooms, passageways and halls existed just to give form to this gigantic chamber. The walls rose sharply, the room being circular in cross section and growing narrower towards the top. It was a truncated cone, since there was no ceiling; a hot blue disk of sky cast light on the floor below.

On the floor stood a knot of men who stared at Brion.

Out of the corner of his eyes, and with the very periphery of his consciousness, he was aware of the rest of the room—barrels, stores, machinery, a radio transceiver, various bundles and heaps that made no sense at first glance. There was no time to look closer. Every fraction of his attention was focused on the muffled and hooded men.

He had found the enemy.

Everything that had happened to him so far on Dis had been preparation for this moment. The attack in the desert, the escape, the dreadful heat of sun and sand. All this had tempered and prepared him. It had been nothing in itself. Now the battle would begin in earnest.

None of this was conscious in his mind. His fighter's reflexes bent his shoulders, curved his hands before him as he walked softly in balance, ready to spring in any direction. Yet none of this was really necessary. All the danger so far was nonphysical. When he did give conscious thought to the situation he stopped, startled. What was wrong here? None of the men had moved or made a sound. How could he even know they were men? They were

so muffled and wrapped in cloth that only their eyes were exposed.

No doubt, however, existed in Brion's mind. In spite of muffled cloth and silence, he knew them for what they were. The eyes were empty of expression and unmoving, yet were filled with the same negative emptiness as those of a bird of prey. They could look on life, death, and the rending of flesh with the same lack of interest and compassion. All this Brion knew in an instant of time, without words being spoken. Between the time he lifted one foot and walked a step he understood what he had to face. There could be no doubt, not to an empathetic.

From the group of silent men poured a frost-white wave of unemotion. An empathetic shares what other men feel. He gets his knowledge of their reaction by sensing lightly their emotions, the surges of interest, hate, love, fear, desire, the sweep of large and small sensations that accompany all thought and action. The empathetic is always aware of this constant and silent surge, whether he makes the effort to understand it or not. He is like a man glancing across the open pages of a tableful of books. He can see that the type, words, paragraphs, thoughts are there, even without focusing his attention to understand any of it.

Then how does the man feel when he glances at the open books and sees only blank pages? The books are there—the words are not. He turns the pages of one, of the others, flipping the pages, searching for meaning. There is no meaning. All of the pages are blank.

This was the way in which the magter were blank, without emotions. There was a barely sensed surge and return that must have been neural impulses on a basic level—the automatic adjustments of nerve and muscle that keep an organism alive. Nothing more. Brion reached for other sensations, but there was nothing there to grasp. Either these men were without emotions, or they were able to block them from his detection; it was impossible to tell which.

Very little time had passed while Brion made these discoveries. The knot of men still looked at him, silent and unmoving. They weren't expectant, their attitude could not have been called one of interest. But he had come to them and now they waited to find out why. Any questions or statements they spoke would be superfluous, so they didn't speak. The responsibility was his.

"I have come to talk with Lig-magte. Who is he?" Brion didn't like the tiny sound his voice made in the immense room.

One of the men gave a slight motion to draw attention to himself. None of the others moved. They still waited.

"I have a message for you," Brion said, speaking slowly to fill the silence of the room and the emptiness of his thoughts. This had to be handled right. But what was right? "I'm from the Foundation in the city, as you undoubtedly know. I've been talking to the people of Nyjord. They have a message for you."

The silence grew longer. Brion had no intention of making this a monologue. He needed facts to operate, to form an opinion. Looking at the

silent forms was telling him nothing. Time stretched taut, and finally Lig-magte spoke.

"The Nyjorders are going to surrender."

It was an impossibly strange sentence. Brion had never realized before how much of the content of speech was made up of emotion. If the man had given it a positive emphasis, perhaps said it with enthusiasm, it would have meant, "Success! The enemy is going to surrender!" This wasn't the meaning.

With a rising inflection on the end it would have been a question. "Are they going to surrender?" It was neither of these. The sentence carried no other message than that contained in the simplest meanings of the separate words. It had intellectual connotations, but these could only be gained from past knowledge, not from the sound of the words. There was only one message they were prepared to receive from Nyjord. Therefore Brion was bringing the message. If that was not the message Brion was bringing the men here were not interested.

This was the vital fact. If they were not interested he could have no further value to them. Since he came from the enemy, he was the enemy. Therefore he would be killed. Because this was vital to his existence, Brion took the time to follow the thought through. It made logical sense—and logic was all he could depend on now. He could be talking to robots or alien creatures, for all the human response he was receiving.

"You can't win this war—all you can do is hurry your own deaths." He said this with as much conviction as he could, realizing at the same time that it was wasted effort. No flicker of response stirred in the men before him. "The Nyjorders know you have the cobalt bombs, and they have detected your jump-space projector. They can't take any more chances. They have pushed the deadline closer by an entire day. There are one and a half days left before the bombs fall and you are all destroyed. Do you realize what that means—"

"Is that the message?" Lig-magte asked.

"Yes," Brion said.

Two things saved his life then. He had guessed what would happen as soon as they had his message, though he hadn't been sure. But even the suspicion had put him on his guard. This, combined with the reflexes of a Winner of the Twenties, was barely enough to enable him to survive.

From frozen mobility Lig-magte had catapulted into headlong attack. As he leaped forward he drew a curved, double-edged blade from under his robes. It plunged unerringly through the spot where Brion's body had been an instant before.

There had been no time to tense his muscles and jump, just the space of time to relax them and fall to one side. His reasoning mind joined the battle as he hit the floor. Lig-magte plunged by him, turning and bringing the knife down at the same time. Brion's foot lashed out and caught the other man's leg, sending him sprawling.

They were both on their feet at the same instant, facing each other. Brion

now had his hands clasped before him in the unarmed man's best defense against a knife, the two arms protecting the body, the two hands joined to beat aside the knife arm from whichever direction it came. The Disan hunched low, flipped the knife quickly from hand to hand, then thrust it again at Brion's midriff.

Only by the merest fractional margin did Brion evade the attack for the second time. Lig-magte fought with utter violence. Every action was as intense as possible, deadly and thorough. There could be only one end to this unequal contest if Brion stayed on the defensive. The man with the knife had to win.

With the next charge Brion changed tactics. He leaped inside the thrust, clutching for the knife arm. A burning slice of pain cut across his arm, then his fingers clutched the tendoned wrist. They clamped down hard, grinding shut, compressing with the tightening intensity of a closing vise.

It was all he could do simply to hold on. There was no science in it, just his greater strength from exercise and existence on a heavier planet. All of this strength went to his clutching hand, because he held his own life in that hand, forcing away the knife that wanted to terminate it forever. Nothing else mattered—neither the frightening force of the knees that thudded into his body nor the hooked fingers that reached for his eyes to tear them out. He protected his face as well as he could, while the nails tore furrows through his flesh and the cut on his arm bled freely. These were only minor things to be endured. His life depended on the grasp of the fingers of his right hand.

There was a sudden immobility as Brion succeeded in clutching Lig-magte's other arm. It was a good grip, and he could hold the arm immobilized. They had reached stasis, standing knee to knee, their faces only a few inches apart. The muffling cloth had fallen from the Disan's face during the struggle, and empty, frigid eyes stared into Brion's. No flicker of emotion crossed the harsh planes of the other man's face. A great puckered white scar covered one cheek and pulled up a corner of the mouth in a cheerless grimace. It was false; there was still no expression here, even when the pain must be growing more intense.

Brion was winning—if none of the watchers broke the impasse. His greater weight and strength counted now. The Disan would have to drop the knife before his arm was dislocated at the shoulder. He didn't do it. With sudden horror Brion realized that he wasn't going to drop it—no matter what happened.

A dull, hideous snap jerked through the Disan's body and the arm hung limp and dead. No expression crossed the man's face. The knife was still locked in the fingers of the paralyzed hand. With his other hand Lig-magte reached across and started to pry the blade loose, ready to continue the battle one-handed. Brion raised his foot and kicked the knife free, sending it spinning across the room.

Lig-magte made a fist of his good hand and crashed it into Brion's groin. He

was still fighting, as if nothing had changed. Brion backed slowly away from the man. "Stop it," he said. "You can't win now. It's impossible." He called to the other men who were watching the unequal battle with expressionless immobility. No one answered him.

With a terrible sinking sensation Brion then realized what would happen and what he had to do. Lig-magte was as heedless of his own life as he was of the life of his planet. He would press the attack no matter what damage was done to him. Brion had an insane vision of him breaking the man's other arm, fracturing both his legs, and the limbless broken creature still coming forward. Crawling, rolling, teeth bared, since they were the only remaining weapon.

There was only one way to end it. Brion feinted and the Lig-magte's arm moved clear of his body. The engulfing cloth was thin and through it Brion could see the outlines of the Disan's abdomen and rib cage, the clear location of the great nerve ganglion.

It was the death blow of kara-te. Brion had never used it on a man. In practice he had broken heavy boards, splintering them instantly with the short, precise stroke. The stiffened hand moving forward in a sudden surge, all the weight and energy of his body concentrated in his joined fingertips. Plunging deep into the other's flesh.

Killing, not by accident or in sudden anger. Killing because this was the only way the battle could possibly end.

Like a ruined tower of flesh, the Disan crumpled and fell.

Dripping blood, exhausted, Brion stood over the body of Lig-magte and stared at the dead man's allies.

Death filled the room.

XI

Facing the silent Disans, Brion's thoughts hurtled about in sweeping circles. There would be no more than an instant's tick of time before the magter avenged themselves bloodily and completely. He felt a fleeting regret for not having brought his gun, then abandoned the thought. There was no time for regrets—what could he do *now*?

The silent watchers hadn't attacked instantly, and Brion realized that they couldn't be positive yet that Lig-magte had been killed. Only Brion himself knew the deadliness of that blow. Their lack of knowledge might buy him a little more time.

"Lig-magte is unconscious, but he will revive quickly," Brion said, pointing at the huddled body. As the eyes turned automatically to follow his finger, he began walking slowly towards the exit. "I did not want to do this, but he forced me to, because he wouldn't listen to reason. Now I have something else to show you, something that I hoped it would not be necessary to reveal."

He was saying the first words that came into his head, trying to keep them distracted as long as possible. He must appear to be only going across the room, that was the feeling he must generate. There was even time to stop for a second and straighten his rumpled clothing and brush the sweat from his eyes. Talking easily, walking slowly towards the hall that led out of the chamber.

He was halfway there when the spell broke and the rush began. One of the magter knelt and touched the body, and shouted a single word: "Dead!"

Brion hadn't waited for the official announcement. At the first movement of feet, he dived headlong for the shelter of the exit. There was a spatter of tiny missiles on the wall next to him and he had a brief glimpse of raised blowguns before the wall intervened. He went up the dimly lit stairs three at a time.

The pack was just behind him, voiceless and deadly. He could not gain on them—if anything, they were closing the distance as he pushed his already tired body to the utmost. There was no subtlety or trick he could use now, just straightforward flight back the way he had come. A single slip on the irregular steps and it would be all over.

There was someone ahead of him. If the woman had waited a few seconds more he would certainly have been killed; but instead of slashing at him as he went by the doorway, she made the mistake of rushing to the center of the stairs, the knife ready to impale him as he came up. Without slowing, Brion fell onto his hands and easily dodged under the blow. As he passed he twisted and seized her around the waist, picking her from the ground.

When her legs lifted from under her the woman screamed—the first human sound Brion had heard in this human anthill. His pursuers were just behind him, and he hurled the woman into them with all his strength. They fell in a

tangle, and Brion used the precious seconds gained to reach the top of the building.

There must have been other stairs and exits, because one of the magter stood between Brion and the way down out of this trap—armed and ready to kill him if he tried to pass.

As he ran towards the executioner, Brion flicked on his collar radio and shouted into it. "I'm in trouble here. Can you—"

The guards in the car must have been waiting for this message. Before he had finished there was the thud of a high-velocity slug hitting flesh and the Disan spun and fell, blood soaking his shoulder. Brion leaped over him and headed for the ramp.

"The next one is me—hold your fire!" he called.

Both guards must have had their telescopic sights zeroed on the spot. They let Brion pass, then threw in a hail of semi-automatic fire that tore chunks from the stone and screamed away in noisy ricochets. Brion didn't try to see if anyone was braving this hail of covering fire; he concentrated his energies on making as quick and erratic a descent as he could. Above the sounds of the firing he heard the car motor howl as it leaped forward. With their careful aim spoiled, the gunners switched to full automatic and unleashed a hailstorm of flying metal that bracketed the top of the tower.

"Cease ... firing!" Brion gasped into the radio as he ran. The driver was good, and timed his arrival with exactitude. The car reached the base of the tower at the same instant Brion did, and he burst through the door while it was still moving. No orders were necessary. He fell headlong onto a seat as the car swung in a dust-raising turn and ground into high gear, back to the city.

Reaching over carefully, the tall guard gently extracted a bit of pointed wood and fluff from a fold of Brion's pants. He cracked open the car door, and just as delicately threw it out.

"I knew that thing didn't touch you," he said, "since you are still among the living. They've got a poison on those blowgun darts that takes all of twelve seconds to work. Lucky."

Lucky! Brion was beginning to realize just how lucky he was to be out of the trap alive. And with information. Now that he knew more about the magter, he shuddered at his innocence in walking alone and unarmed into the tower. Skill had helped him survive—but better than average luck had been necessary. Curiosity had gotten him in, brashness and speed had taken him out. He was exhausted, battered and bloody—but cheerfully happy. The facts about the magter were arranging themselves into a theory that might explain their attempt at racial suicide. It just needed a little time to be put into shape.

A pain cut across his arm and he jumped, startled, pieces of his thoughts crashing into ruin around him. The gunner had cracked the first-aid box and was swabbing his arm with antiseptic. The knife wound was long, but not deep. Brion shivered while the bandage was going on, then quickly slipped into his coat. The air conditioner whined industriously, bringing down the

temperature.

There was no attempt to follow the car. When the black tower had dropped over the horizon the guards relaxed, ran cleaning rods through their guns and compared marksmanship. All of their antagonism towards Brion was gone; they actually smiled at him. He had given them the first chance to shoot back since they had been on this planet.

The ride was uneventful, and Brion was scarcely aware of it. A theory was taking form in his mind. It was radical and startling—yet it seemed to be the only one that fitted the facts. He pushed at it from all sides, but if there were any holes he couldn't find them. What it needed was dispassionate proving or disproving. There was only one person on Dis who was qualified to do this.

Lea was working in the lab when he came in, bent over a low-power binocular microscope. Something small, limbless and throbbing was on the slide. She glanced up when she heard his footsteps, smiling warmly when she recognized him. Fatigue and pain had drawn her face; her skin, glistening with burn ointment, was chapped and peeling.

"I must look a wreck," she said, putting the back of her hand to her cheek. "Something like a well-oiled and lightly cooked piece of beef." She lowered her arm suddenly and took his hand in both of hers. Her palms were warm and slightly moist.

"Thank you, Brion," was all she could say. Her society on Earth was highly civilized and sophisticated, able to discuss any topic without emotion and without embarrassment. This was fine in most circumstances, but made it difficult to thank a person for saving your life. However you tried to phrase it, it came out sounding like a last-act speech from a historical play. There was no doubt, however, as to what she meant. Her eyes were large and dark, the pupils dilated by the drugs she had been given. They could not lie, nor could the emotions he sensed. He did not answer, just held her hand an instant longer.

"How do you feel," he asked, concerned. His conscience twinged as he remembered that he was the one who had ordered her out of bed and back to work today.

"I should be feeling terrible," she said, with an airy wave of her hand. "But I'm walking on top of the world. I'm so loaded with painkillers and stimulants that I'm high as the moon. All the nerves to my feet feel turned off—it's like walking on two balls of fluff. Thanks for getting me out of that awful hospital and back to work."

Brion was suddenly sorry for having driven her from her sick bed.

"Don't be sorry!" Lea said, apparently reading his mind, but really seeing only his sudden ashamed expression. "I'm feeling no pain. Honestly. I feel a little light-headed and foggy at times, nothing more. And this is the job I came here to do. In fact ... well, it's almost impossible to tell you just how fascinating it all is! It was almost worth getting baked and parboiled for."

She swung back to the microscope, centering the specimen with a turn of

the stage adjustment screw. "Poor Ihjel was right when he said this planet was exobiologically fascinating. This is a gastropod, a lot like *Odostomia*, but it has parasitical morphological changes so profound that—"

"There's something else I remember," Brion said, interrupting her enthusiastic lecture, only half of which he could understand. "Didn't Ihjel also hope that you would give some study to the natives as well as their environment? The problem is with the Disans—not with the local wild life."

"But I *am* studying them," Lea insisted. "The Disans have attained an incredibly advanced form of commensalism. Their lives are so intimately connected and integrated with the other life forms that they must be studied in relation to their environment. I doubt if they show as many external physical changes as little eating-foot *Odostomia* on the slide here, but there will surely be a number of psychological changes and adjustments that will crop up. One of these might be the explanation of their urge for planetary suicide."

"That may be true—but I don't think so," Brion said. "I went on a little expedition this morning and found something that has more immediate relevancy."

For the first time Lea became aware of his slightly battered condition. Her drug-grooved mind could only follow a single idea at a time and had overlooked the significance of the bandage and dirt.

"I've been visiting," Brion said, forestalling the question on her lips. "The magter are the ones who are responsible for causing the trouble, and I had to see them up close before I could make any decisions. It wasn't a very pleasant thing, but I found out what I wanted to know. They are different in every way from the normal Disans. I've compared them. I've talked to Ulv—the native who saved us in the desert—and I can understand him. He is not like us in many ways—he certainly couldn't be, living in this oven—but he is still undeniably human. He gave us drinking water when we needed it, then brought help. The magter, the upper-class lords of Dis, are the direct opposite. As cold-blooded and ruthless a bunch of murderers as you can possibly imagine. They tried to kill me when they met me, without reason. Their clothes, habits, dwellings, manners—everything about them differs from that of the normal Disan. More important, the magter are as coldly efficient and inhuman as a reptile. They have no emotions, no love, no hate, no anger, no fear—nothing. Each of them is a chilling bundle of thought processes and reactions, with all the emotions removed."

"Aren't you exaggerating?" Lea asked. "After all, you can't be sure. It might just be part of their training not to reveal any emotional state. Everyone must experience emotional states, whether they like it or not."

"That's my main point. Everyone does—except the magter. I can't go into all the details now, so you'll just have to take my word for it. Even at the point of death they have no fear or hatred. It may sound impossible, but it is true."

Lea tried to shake the knots from her drug-hazed mind. "I'm dull today," she said. "You'll have to excuse me. If these rulers had no emotional

responses, that might explain their present suicidal position. But an explanation like this raises more new problems than it supplies answers to the old ones. How did they get this way! It doesn't seem humanly possible to be without emotions of some kind."

"Just my point. Not *humanly* possible. I think these ruling class Disans aren't human at all, like the other Disans. I think they are alien creatures—robots or androids—anything except men. I think they are living in disguise among the normal human dwellers."

At first Lea started to smile, then her feeling changed when she saw his face. "You are serious?" she asked.

"Never more so. I realize it must sound as if I've had my brains bounced around too much this morning. Yet this is the only idea I can come up with that fits all of the facts. Look at the evidence yourself. One simple thing stands out clearly, and must be considered first if any theory is to hold up. That is the magters' complete indifference to death—their own or anyone else's. Is that normal to mankind?"

"No—but I can find a couple of explanations that I would rather explore first, before dragging in an alien life form. There may have been a mutation or an inherited disease that has deformed or warped their minds."

"Wouldn't that be sort of self-eliminating?" Brion asked. "Anti-survival? People who die before puberty would find it a little difficult to pass on a mutation to their children. But let's not beat this one point to death—it's the totality of these people that I find so hard to accept. Any one thing might be explained away, but not the collection of them. What about their complete lack of emotion? Or their manner of dress and their secrecy in general? The ordinary Disan wears a cloth kilt, while the magter cover themselves as completely as possible. They stay in their black towers and never go out except in groups. Their dead are always removed so they can't be examined. In every way they act like a race apart—and I think they are."

"Granted for the moment that this outlandish idea might be true, how did they get here? And why doesn't anyone know about it besides them?"

"Easily enough explained," Brion insisted. "There are no written records on this planet. After the Breakdown, when the handful of survivors were just trying to exist here, the aliens could have landed and moved in. Any interference could have been wiped out. Once the population began to grow, the invaders found they could keep control by staying separate, so their alien difference wouldn't be noticed."

"Why should that bother them?" Lea asked. "If they are so indifferent to death, they can't have any strong thoughts on public opinion or alien body odor. Why would they bother with such a complex camouflage? And if they arrived from another planet, what has happened to the scientific ability that brought them here?"

"Peace," Brion said. "I don't know enough to be able even to guess at answers to half your questions. I'm just trying to fit a theory to the facts. And

the facts are clear. The magter are so inhuman they would give me nightmares—if I were sleeping these days. What we need is more evidence."

"Then get it," Lea said with finality. "I'm not telling you to turn murderer—but you might try a bit of grave-digging. Give me a scalpel and one of your friends stretched out on a slab and I'll quickly tell you what he is or is not." She turned back to the microscope and bent over the eyepiece.

That was really the only way to hack the Gordian knot. Dis had only thirty-six more hours to live, so individual deaths shouldn't be of any concern. He had to find a dead magter, and if none was obtainable in the proper condition he had to get one of them by violence. For a planetary savior, he was personally doing in an awful lot of the citizenry.

He stood behind Lea, looking down at her thoughtfully while she worked. The back of her neck, lightly covered with gently curling hair, was turned toward him. With one of the about-face shifts the mind is capable of, his thoughts flipped from death to life, and he experienced a strong desire to caress this spot lightly, to feel the yielding texture of female flesh....

Plunging his hands deep into his pockets, he walked quickly to the door. "Get some rest soon," he called to her. "I doubt if those bugs will give you the answer. I'm going now to see if I can get the full-sized specimen you want."

"The truth could be anywhere. I'll stay on these until you come back," she said, not looking up from the microscope.

Up under the roof was a well-equipped communications room. Brion had taken a quick look at it when he had first toured the building. The duty operator had earphones on—though only one of the phones covered an ear—and was monitoring through the bands. His shoeless feet were on the edge of the table, and he was eating a thick sandwich held in his free hand. His eyes bulged when he saw Brion in the doorway and he jumped into a flurry of action.

"Hold the pose," Brion told him; "it doesn't bother me. And if you make any sudden moves you are liable to break a phone, electrocute yourself, or choke to death. Just see if you can set the transceiver on this frequency for me." Brion wrote the number on a scratch pad and slid it over to the operator. It was the frequency Professor-Commander Krafft had given him for the radio of the illegal terrorists—the Nyjord army.

The operator plugged in a handset and gave it to Brion. "Circuit open," he mumbled around a mouthful of still unswallowed sandwich.

"This is Brandd, director of the C.R.F. Come in, please." He went on repeating this for more than ten minutes before he got an answer.

"What do you want?"

"I have a message of vital urgency for you—and I would also like your help. Do you want any more information on the radio?"

"No. Wait there—we'll get in touch with you after dark." The carrier wave went dead.

Thirty-five hours to the end of the world—and all he could do was wait.

XII

On Brion's desk when he came in, were two neat piles of paper. As he sat down and reached for them he was conscious of an arctic coldness in the air, a frigid blast. It was coming from the air-conditioner grill, which was now covered by welded steel bars. The control unit was sealed shut. Someone was either being very funny or very efficient. Either way, it was cold. Brion kicked at the cover plate until it buckled, then bent it aside. After a careful look into the interior he disconnected one wire and shorted it to another. He was rewarded by a number of sputtering cracks and a quantity of smoke. The compressor moaned and expired.

Faussel was standing in the door with more papers, a shocked expression on his face. "What do you have there?" Brion asked.

Faussel managed to straighten out his face and brought the folders to the desk, arranging them on the piles already there. "These are the progress reports you asked for, from all units. Details to date, conclusions, suggestions, et cetera."

"And the other pile?" Brion pointed.

"Offplanet correspondence, commissary invoices, requisitions." He straightened the edges of the stack while he answered. "Daily reports, hospital log...." His voice died away and stopped as Brion carefully pushed the stack off the edge of the desk into the wastebasket.

"In other words, red tape," Brion said. "Well, it's all filed."

One by one the progress reports followed the first stack into the basket, until the desk was clear. Nothing. It was just what he had expected. But there had always been the off chance that one of the specialists could come up with a new approach. They hadn't; they were all too busy specializing.

Outside the sky was darkening. The front entrance guard had been told to let in anyone who came asking for the director. There was nothing else Brion could do until the Nyjord rebels made contact. Irritation bit at him. At least Lea was doing something constructive; he could look in on her.

He opened the door to the lab with a feeling of pleasant anticipation. It froze and shattered instantly. Her microscope was hooded and she was gone. *She's having dinner*, he thought, or—*she's in the hospital*. The hospital was on the floor below, and he went there first.

"Of course she's here!" Dr. Stine grumbled. "Where else should a girl in her condition be? She was out of bed long enough today. Tomorrow's the last day, and if you want to get any more work out of her before the deadline, you had better let her rest tonight. Better let the whole staff rest. I've been handing out tranquilizers like aspirin all day. They're falling apart."

"The world's falling apart. How is Lea doing?"

"Considering her shape, she's fine. Go in and see for yourself if you won't take my word for it. I have other patients to look at."

"Are you that worried, Doctor?"

"Of course I am! I'm just as prone to the weakness of the flesh as the rest of you. We're sitting on a ticking bomb and I don't like it. I'll do my job as long as it is necessary, but I'll also be damned glad to see the ships land to pull us out. The only skin that I really feel emotionally concerned about right now is my own. And if you want to be let in on a public secret—the rest of your staff feels the same way. So don't look forward to too much efficiency."

"I never did," Brion said to the retreating back.

Lea's room was dark, illuminated only by the light of Dis's moon slanting in through the window. Brion let himself in and closed the door behind him. Walking quietly, he went over to the bed. Lea was sleeping soundly, her breathing gentle and regular. A night's sleep now would do as much good as all the medication.

He should have gone then; instead, he sat down in the chair placed next to the head of the bed. The guards knew where he was—he could wait here just as well as any place else.

It was a stolen moment of peace on a world at the brink of destruction. He was grateful for it. Everything looked less harsh in the moonlight, and he rubbed some of the tension from his eyes. Lea's face was ironed smooth by the light, beautiful and young, a direct contrast to everything else on this poisonous world. Her hand was outside of the covers and he took it in his own, obeying a sudden impulse. Looking out of the window at the desert in the distance, he let the peace wash over him, forcing himself to forget for the moment that in one more day life would be stripped from this planet.

Later, when he looked back at Lea he saw that her eyes were open, though she hadn't moved. How long had she been awake? He jerked his hand away from hers, feeling suddenly guilty.

"Is the boss-man looking after the serfs, to see if they're fit for the treadmills in the morning?" she asked. It was the kind of remark she had used with such frequency in the ship, though it didn't sound quite as harsh now. And she was smiling. Yet it reminded him too well of her superior attitude towards rubes from the stellar sticks. Here he might be the director, but on ancient Earth he would be only one more gaping, lead-footed yokel.

"How do you feel?" he asked, realizing and hating the triteness of the words, even as he said them.

"Terrible. I'll be dead by morning. Reach me a piece of fruit from that bowl, will you? My mouth tastes like an old boot heel. I wonder how fresh fruit ever got here. Probably a gift to the working classes from the smiling planetary murderers on Nyjord."

She took the apple Brion gave her and bit into it. "Did you ever think of going to Earth?"

Brion was startled. This was too close to his own thoughts about planetary

backgrounds. There couldn't possibly be a connection though. "Never," he told her. "Up until a few months ago I never even considered leaving Anvhar. The Twenties are such a big thing at home that it is hard to imagine that anything else exists while you are still taking part in them."

"Spare me the Twenties," she pleaded. "After listening to you and Ihjel, I know far more about them than I shall ever care to know. But what about Anvhar itself? Do you have big city-states as Earth does?"

"Nothing like that. For its size, it has a very small population. No big cities at all. I guess the largest centers of population are around the schools, packing plants, things like that."

"Any exobiologists there?" Lea asked, with a woman's eternal ability to make any general topic personal.

"At the universities, I suppose, though I wouldn't know for sure. And you must realize that when I say no big cities, I also mean no little cities. We aren't organized that way at all. I imagine the basic physical unit is the family and the circle of friends. Friends get important quickly, since the family breaks up when children are still relatively young. Something in the genes, I suppose—we all enjoy being alone. I suppose you might call it an inbred survival trait."

"Up to a point," she said, biting delicately into the apple. "Carry that sort of thing too far and you end up with no population at all. A certain amount of proximity is necessary for that."

"Of course it is. And there must be some form of recognized relationship or control—that or complete promiscuity. On Anvhar the emphasis is on personal responsibility, and that seems to take care of the problem. If we didn't have an adult way of looking at ... things, our kind of life would be impossible. Individuals are brought together either by accident or design, and with this proximity must be some certainty of relations...."

"You're losing me," Lea protested. "Either I'm still foggy from the dope, or you are suddenly unable to speak a word of less than four syllables. You know—whenever this happens with you, I get the distinct impression that you are trying to cover up something. For Occam's sake, be specific! Bring me together two of these hypothetical individuals and tell me what happens."

Brion took a deep breath. He was in over his head and far from shore. "Well—take a bachelor like myself. Since I like cross-country skiing I make my home in this big house our family has, right at the edge of the Broken Hills. In summer I looked after a drumtum herd, but after slaughtering my time was my own all winter. I did a lot of skiing, and used to work for the Twenties. Sometimes I would go visiting. Then again, people would drop in on me—houses are few and far between on Anvhar. We don't even have locks on our doors. You accept and give hospitality without qualification. Whoever comes. Male ... female ... in groups or just traveling alone...."

"I get the drift. Life must be dull for a single girl on your iceberg planet. She must surely have to stay home a lot."

"Only if she wants to. Otherwise she can go wherever she wishes and be

welcomed as another individual. I suppose it is out of fashion in the rest of the galaxy—and would probably raise a big laugh on Earth—but a platonic, disinterested friendship between man and woman is an accepted thing on Anvhar."

"Sounds exceedingly dull. If you are all such cool and distant friends, how do babies get made?"

Brion felt his ears reddening, not sure if he was being teased or not. "The same damn way they get made any place else! But it's not just a reflexive process like a couple of rabbits that happen to meet under the same bush. It's the woman's choice to indicate if she is interested in marriage."

"Is marriage the only thing your women are interested in?"

"Marriage or ... anything else. That's up to the girl. We have a special problem on Anvhar—probably the same thing occurs on every planet where the human race has made a massive adaptation. Not all unions are fertile and there is always a large percentage of miscarriages. A large number of births are conceived by artificial insemination. Which is all right when you can't have babies normally. But most women have an emotional bias towards having their husband's children. And there is only one way to find out if this is possible."

Lea's eyes widened. "Are you suggesting that your girls see if a man can father children *before* considering marriage?"

"Of course. Otherwise Anvhar would have been depopulated centuries ago. Therefore the woman does the choosing. If she is interested in a man, she says so. If she is not interested, the man would never think of suggesting anything. It's a lot different from other planets, but so is our planet Anvhar. It works well for us, which is the only test that applies."

"Just about the opposite of Earth," Lea told him, dropping the apple core into a dish and carefully licking the tips of her fingers. "I guess you Anvharians would describe Earth as a planetary hotbed of sexuality. The reverse of your system, and going full blast all the time. There are far too many people there for comfort. Birth control came late and is still being fought—if you can possibly imagine that. There are just too many of the archaic religions still around, as well as crackbrained ideas that have been long entrenched in custom. The world's overcrowded. Men, women, children, a boiling mob wherever you look. And all of the physically mature ones seem to be involved in the Great Game of Love. The male is always the aggressor. Not physically—at least not often—and women take the most outrageous kinds of flattery for granted. At parties there are always a couple of hot breaths of passion fanning your neck. A girl has to keep her spike heels filed sharp."

"She has to *what*?"

"A figure of speech, Brion. Meaning you fight back all the time, if you don't want to be washed under by the flood."

"Sounds rather"—Brion weighed the word before he said it, but could find

none other suitable—"repellent."

"From your point of view, it would be. I'm afraid we get so used to it that we even take it for granted. Sociologically speaking...." She stopped and looked at Brion's straight back and almost rigid posture. Her eyes widened and her mouth opened in an unspoken *oh* of sudden realization.

"I'm being a fool," she said. "You weren't speaking generally at all! You had a very specific subject in mind. Namely *me*!"

"Please, Lea, you must understand...."

"But I do!" She laughed. "All the time I thought you were being a frigid and hard-hearted lump of ice, you were really being very sweet. Just playing the game in good old Anvharian style. Waiting for a sign from me. We'd still be playing by different rules if you hadn't had more sense than I, and finally realized that somewhere along the line we must have got our signals mixed. And I thought you were some kind of frosty offworld celibate." She let her hand go out and her fingers rustled through his hair. Something she had been wanting to do for a long time.

"I had to," he said, trying to ignore the light touch of her fingers. "Because I thought so much of you, I couldn't have done anything to insult you. Such as forcing my attentions on you. Until I began to worry where the insult would lie, since I knew nothing about your planet's mores."

"Well, you know now," she said very softly. "The men aggress. Now that I understand, I think I like your way better. But I'm still not sure of all the rules. Do I explain that yes, Brion, I like you so very much? You are more man, in one great big wide-shouldered lump, than I have ever met before. It's not quite the time or the place to discuss marriage, but I would certainly like—"

His arms were around her, holding her to him. Her hands clasped him and their lips sought each other's in the darkness.

"Gently ..." she whispered. "I bruise easily...."

XIII

"He wouldn't come in, sir. Just hammered on the door and said, '*I'm here, tell Brandd.*'"

"Good enough," Brion said, fitting his gun in the holster and sliding the extra clips into his pocket. "I'm going out now, and I should return before dawn. Get one of the wheeled stretchers down here from the hospital. I'll want it waiting when I get back."

Outside, the street was darker than he remembered. Brion frowned and his hand moved towards his gun. Someone had put all the nearby lights out of commission. There was just enough illumination from the stars to enable him to make out the dark bulk of a sand car.

"Brion Brandd?" a voice spoke harshly from the car. "Get in."

The motor roared as soon as he had closed the door. Without lights the sand car churned a path through the city and out into the desert. Though the speed picked up, the driver still drove in the dark, feeling his way with a light touch on the controls. The ground rose, and when they reached the top of a mesa he killed the engine. Neither the driver nor Brion had spoken a word since they left.

A switch snapped and the instrument lights came on. In their dim glow Brion could just make out the other man's hawklike profile. When he moved, Brion saw that his figure was cruelly shortened. Either accident or a mutated gene had warped his spine, hunching him forward in eternally bent supplication. Warped bodies were rare—his was the first Brion had ever seen. He wondered what series of events had kept him from medical attention all his life. This might explain the bitterness and pain in the man's voice.

"Did the mighty brains on Nyjord bother to tell you that they have chopped another day off the deadline?" the man asked. "That this world is about to come to an end?"

"Yes, I know," Brion said. "That's why I'm asking your group for help. Our time is running out too fast."

The man didn't answer; he merely grunted and gave his full attention to the radar pings and glowing screen. The electronic senses reached out as he made a check on all the search frequencies to see if they were being followed.

"Where are we going?" Brion asked.

"Out into the desert." The driver made a vague wave of his hand. "Headquarters of the army. Since the whole thing will be blown up in another day, I guess I can tell you it's the only camp we have. All the cars, men and weapons are based there. And Hys. He's the man in charge. Tomorrow it will be all gone—along with this cursed planet. What's your business with us?"

"Shouldn't I be telling Hys that?"

"Suit yourself." Satisfied with the instrument search, the driver kicked the car to life again and churned on across the desert. "But we're a volunteer army and we have no secrets from each other. Just from the fools at home who are going to kill this world." There was a bitterness in his words that he made no attempt to conceal. "They fought among themselves and put off a firm decision so long that now they are forced to commit murder."

"From what I had heard, I thought that it was the other way around. They call your Nyjord army terrorists."

"We are. Because we are an army and we're at war. The idealists at home only understood that when it was too late. If they had backed us in the beginning we would have blown open every black castle on Dis, searched until we found those bombs. But that would have meant wanton destruction and death. They wouldn't consider that. Now they are going to kill everyone, destroy everything." He flicked on the panel lights just long enough to take a compass bearing, and Brion saw the tortured unhappiness in his twisted body.

"It's not over yet," Brion said. "There is more than a day left, and I think I'm onto something that might stop the war—without any bombs being dropped."

"You're in charge of the Cultural Relationships Free Bread and Blankets Foundation, aren't you? What good can your bunch do when the shooting starts?"

"None. But maybe we can put off the shooting. If you are trying to insult me—don't bother. My irritation quotient is very high."

The driver merely grunted at this, slowing down as they ran through a field of broken rock. "What is it you want?" he asked.

"We want to make a detailed examination of one of the magter. Alive or dead, it doesn't make any difference. You wouldn't happen to have one around?"

"No. We've fought with them often enough, but always on their home grounds. They keep all their casualties, and a good number of ours. What good will it do you anyway? A dead one won't tell you where the bombs or the jump-space projector is."

"I don't see why I should explain that to you—unless you are in charge. You are Hys, aren't you?"

The driver gave an angry sound, and then was silent while he drove. Finally he asked, "What makes you think that?"

"Call it a hunch. You don't act very much like a sand-car driver, for one thing. Of course your army may be all generals and no privates—but I doubt it. I also know that time has almost run out for all of us. This is a long ride and it would be a complete waste of time if you just sat out in the desert and waited for me. By driving me yourself you could make your mind up before we arrived. Could have a decision ready as to whether you are going to help me or not. Are you?"

"Yes—I'm Hys. But you still haven't answered my question. What do you want the body for?"

"We're going to cut it open and take a good long look. I don't think the magter are human. They are something living among men and disguised as men—but still not human."

"Secret aliens?" Hys exploded the words in a mixture of surprise and disgust.

"Perhaps. The examination will tell us that."

"You're either stupid or incompetent," Hys said bitterly. "The heat of Dis has cooked your brains in your head. I'll be no part of this kind of absurd plan."

"You must," Brion said, surprised at his own calmness. He could sense the other man's interest hidden behind his insulting manner. "I don't even have to give you my reasons. In another day this world ends and you have no way to stop it. I just might have an idea that could work, and you can't afford to take any chances—not if you are really sincere. Either you are a murderer, killing Disans for pleasure, or you honestly want to stop the war. Which is it?"

"You'll have your body all right," Hys grated, hurling the car viciously around a spire of rock. "Not that it will accomplish anything—but I can find no fault with killing another magter. We can fit your operation into our plans without any trouble. This is the last night and I have sent every one of my teams out on raids. We're breaking into as many magter towers as possible before dawn. There is a slim chance that we might uncover something. It's really just shooting in the dark, but it's all we can do now. My own team is waiting and you can ride along with us. The others left earlier. We're going to hit a small tower on this side of the city. We raided it once before and captured a lot of small arms they had stored there. There is a good chance that they may have been stupid enough to store something there again. Sometimes the magter seem to suffer from a complete lack of imagination."

"You have no idea just how right you are," Brion told him.

The sand car slowed down now, as they approached a slab-sided mesa that rose vertically from the desert. They crunched across broken rocks, leaving no tracks. A light blinked on the dashboard, and Hys stopped instantly and killed the engine. They climbed out, stretching and shivering in the cold desert night.

It was dark walking in the shadow of the cliff and they had to feel their way along a path through the tumbled boulders. A sudden blaze of light made Brion wince and shield his eyes. Near him, on the ground, was the humming shape of a cancellation projector, sending out a fan-shaped curtain of vibration that absorbed all the light rays falling upon it. This incredible blackness made a lightproof wall for the recessed hollow at the foot of the cliff. In this shelter, under the overhang of rock, were three open sand cars. They were large and armor-plated, warlike in their scarred grey paint. Men sprawled, talked, and polished their weapons. Everything stopped when Hys and Brion appeared.

"Load up," Hys called out. "We're going to attack now, same plan I outlined earlier. Get Telt over here." In talking to his own men some of the harshness

was gone from his voice. The tall soldiers of Nyjord moved in ready obedience of their commander. They loomed over his bent figure, most of them twice as tall as he, but there was no hesitation in jumping when he commanded. They were the body of the Nyjord striking force—he was the brains.

A square-cut, compact man rolled up to Hys and saluted with a leisurely flick of his hand. He was weighted and slung about with packs and electronic instruments. His pockets bulged with small tools and spare parts.

"This is Telt," Hys said to Brion. "He'll take care of you. Telt's my personal technical squad. He goes along on all my operations with his meters to test the interiors of the Disan forts. So far he's found no trace of a jump-space generator, or excess radioactivity that might indicate a bomb. Since he's useless and you're useless, you both take care of each other. Use the car we came in."

Telt's wide face split in a froglike grin; his voice was hoarse and throaty. "Wait. Just wait! Someday those needles gonna flicker and all our troubles be over. What you want me to do with the stranger?"

"Supply him with a corpse—one of the magter," Hys said. "Take it wherever he wants and then report back here." Hys scowled at Telt. "Someday your needles will flicker! Poor fool—this is the last day." He turned away and waved the men into their sand cars.

"He likes me," Telt said, attaching a final piece of equipment. "You can tell because he calls me names like that. He's a great man, Hys is, but they never found out until it was too late. Hand me that meter, will you?"

Brion followed the technician out to the car and helped him load his equipment aboard. When the larger cars appeared out of the darkness, Telt swung around after them. They snaked forward in a single line through the rocks, until they came to the desert of rolling sand dunes. Then they spread out in line abreast and rushed towards their goal.

Telt hummed to himself hoarsely as he drove. He broke off suddenly and looked at Brion. "What you want the dead Dis for?"

"A theory," Brion answered sluggishly. He had been half napping in the chair, taking the opportunity for some rest before the attack. "I'm still looking for a way to avert the end."

"You and Hys," Telt said with satisfaction. "Couple of idealists. Trying to stop a war you didn't start. They never would listen to Hys. He told them in the beginning exactly what would happen, and he was right. They always thought his ideas were crooked, like him. Growing up alone in the hill camp, with his back too twisted and too old to be fixed when he finally did come out. Ideas twisted the same way. Made himself an authority on war. Hah! War on Nyjord—that's like being an ice-cube specialist in hell. But he knew all about it, though they never would let him use what he knew. Put granddaddy Krafft in charge instead."

"But Hys is in charge of an army now?"

"All volunteers, too few of them and too little money. Too little and too

damned late to do any good. I'll tell you we did our best, but it could never be good enough. And for this we get called butchers." There was a catch in Telt's voice now, an undercurrent of emotion he couldn't suppress. "At home they think we like to kill. Think we're insane. They can't understand we're doing the only thing that has to be done—"

He broke off as he quickly locked on the brakes and killed the engine. The line of sand cars had come to a stop. Ahead, just visible over the dunes, was the summit of a dark tower.

"We walk from here," Telt said, standing and stretching. "We can take our time, because the other boys go in first, soften things up. Then you and I head for the sub-cellar for a radiation check and find you a handsome corpse."

Walking at first, then crawling when the dunes no longer shielded them, they crept up on the Disan keep. Dark figures moved ahead of them, stopping only when they reached the crumbling black walls. They didn't use the ascending ramp, but made their way up the sheer outside face of the ramparts.

"Line-throwers," Telt whispered. "Anchor themselves when the missile hits, have some kind of quick-setting goo. Then we go up the filament with a line-climbing motor. Hys invented them."

"Is that the way you and I are going in?" Brion asked.

"No, we get out of the climbing. I told you we hit this rock once before. I know the layout inside." He was moving while he talked, carefully pacing the distance around the base of the tower. "Should be right about here."

High-pitched keening sliced the air and the top of the magter building burst into flame. Automatic weapons hammered above them. Something fell silently through the night and hit heavily on the ground near them.

"Attack's started," Telt shouted. "We have to get through now, while all the creepies are fighting it out on top." He pulled a plate-shaped object from one of his bags and slapped it hard against the wall. It hung there. He twisted the back of it, pulled something and waved Brion to the ground. "Shaped charge. Should blow straight in, but you never can tell."

The ground jumped under them and the ringing thud was a giant fist punching through the wall. A cloud of dust and smoke rolled clear and they could see the dark opening in the rock, a tunnel driven into the wall by the directional force of the explosion. Telt shone a light through the hole at the crumbled chamber inside.

"Nothing to worry about from anybody who was leaning against this wall. But let's get in and out of this black beehive before the ones upstairs come down to investigate."

Shattered rock was thick on the floor, and they skidded and tumbled over it. Telt pointed the way with his light, down a sharply angled ramp. "Underground chambers in the rock. They always store their stuff down there —"

A smoking, black sphere arced out of the tunnel's mouth, hitting at their feet. Telt just gaped, but even as it hit the floor Brion was jumping forward.

He caught it with the side of his foot, kicking it back into the dark opening of the tunnel. Telt hit the ground next to him as the orange flame of an explosion burst below. Bits of shrapnel rattled from the ceiling and wall behind them.

"Grenades!" Telt gasped. "They've only used them once before—can't have many. Gotta warn Hys." He plugged a throat mike into the transmitter on his tack and spoke quickly into it. There was a stirring below and Brion poured a rain of fire into the tunnel.

"They're catching it bad on top, too! We gotta pull out. Go first and I'll cover you."

"I came for my Disan—I'm not leaving until I get one."

"You're crazy! You're dead if you stay!"

Telt was scrambling back towards the crumbled entrance as he talked. His back was turned when Brion fired. The magter had appeared silently as the shadow of death. They charged without a sound, running with expressionless faces into the bullets. Two died at once, curling and folding; the third one fell at Brion's feet. Shot, pierced, dying, but not yet dead. Leaving a crimson track, it hunched closer, lifting its knife to Brion. He didn't move. How many times must you murder a man? Or was it a man? His mind and body rebelled against the killing, and he was almost ready to accept death himself, rather than kill again.

Telt's bullets tore through the body and it dropped with grim finality.

"There's your corpse—now get it out of here!" Telt screeched.

Between them they worked the sodden weight of the dead magter through the hole, their exposed backs crawling with the expectation of instant death. No further attack came as they ran from the tower, other than a grenade that exploded too far behind them to do any harm.

One of the armored sand cars circled the keep, headlights blazing, keeping up a steady fire from its heavy weapons. The attackers climbed into it as they beat a retreat. Telt and Brion dragged the Disan behind them, struggling through the loose sand towards the circling car. Telt glanced over his shoulder and broke into a shambling run.

"They're following us!" he gasped. "The first time they ever chased us after a raid!"

"They must know we have the body," Brion said.

"Leave it behind ..." Telt choked. "Too heavy to carry ... anyway!"

"I'd rather leave you," Brion said sharply. "Let me have it." He pulled the corpse away from the unresisting Telt and heaved it across his own shoulders. "Now use your gun to cover us!"

Telt threw a rain of slugs back towards the dark figures following them. The driver of the sand car must have seen the flare of their fire, because the truck turned and started towards them. It braked in a choking cloud of dust and ready hands reached to pull them up. Brion pushed the body in ahead of himself and scrambled after it. The truck engine throbbed and they churned away into the blackness, away from the gutted tower.

"You know, that was more like kind of a joke, when I said I'd leave the corpse behind," Telt told Brion. "You didn't believe me, did you?"

"Yes," Brion said, holding the dead weight of the magter against the truck's side. "I thought you meant it."

"Ahhh," Telt protested, "you're as bad as Hys. You take things too seriously."

Brion suddenly realized that he was wet with blood, his clothing sodden. His stomach rose at the thought and he clutched the edge of the sand car. Killing like this was too personal. Talking abstractedly about a body was one thing, but murdering a man, then lifting his dead flesh and feeling his blood warm upon you is an entirely different matter. But the magter weren't human, he knew that. The thought was only mildly comforting.

After they had reached the other waiting sand cars, the raiding party split up. "Each one goes in a different direction," Telt said, "so they can't track us to the base." He clipped a piece of paper next to the compass and kicked the motor into life. "We'll make a big U in the desert and end up in Hovedstad. I got the course here. Then I'll dump you and your friends and beat it back to our camp. You're not still burned at me for what I said, are you? Are you?"

Brion didn't answer. He was staring fixedly out of the side window.

"What's doing?" Telt asked. Brion pointed out at the rushing darkness.

"Over there," he said, pointing to the growing light on the horizon.

"Dawn," Telt said. "Lotta rain on your planet? Didn't you ever see the sun come up before?"

"Not on the last day of a world."

"Lock it up," Telt grumbled. "You give me the crawls. I know they're going to be blasted. But at least I know I did everything I could to stop it. How do you think they are going to be feeling at home—on Nyjord—from tomorrow on?"

"Maybe we can still stop it," Brion said, shrugging off the feeling of gloom. Telt's only answer was a wordless sound of disgust.

By the time they had cut a large loop in the desert the sun was well up in the sky, the daily heat begun. Their course took them through a chain of low, flinty hills that cut their speed almost to zero. They ground ahead in low gear while Telt sweated and cursed, struggling with the controls. Then they were on firm sand and picking up speed towards the city.

As soon as Brion saw Hovedstad clearly he felt a clutch of fear. From somewhere in the city a black plume of smoke was rising. It could have been one of the deserted buildings aflame, a minor blaze. Yet the closer they came, the greater his tension grew. Brion didn't dare put it into words himself; it was Telt who vocalized the thought.

"A fire or something. Coming from your area, somewhere close to your building."

Within the city they saw the first signs of destruction. Broken rubble on the streets. The smell of greasy smoke in their nostrils. More and more people

appeared, going in the same direction they were. The normally deserted streets of Hovedstad were now almost crowded. Disans, obvious by their bare shoulders, mixed with the few offworlders who still remained.

Brion made sure the tarpaulin was well wrapped around the body before they pushed the sand car slowly through the growing crowd.

"I don't like all this publicity," Telt complained, looking at the people. "It's the last day, or I'd be turning back. They know our cars; we've raided them often enough." Turning a corner, he braked suddenly, mouth agape.

Ahead was destruction. Black, broken rubble had been churned into desolation. It was still smoking, pink tongues of flame licking over the ruins. A fragment of wall fell with a rumbling crash.

"It's your building—the Foundation building!" Telt shouted. "They've been here ahead of us—must have used the radio to call a raid. They did a job, explosive of some kind."

Hope was dead. Dis was dead. In the ruin ahead, mixed and broken with other rubble, were the bodies of all the people who had trusted him. Lea ... beautiful and cruelly dead Lea. Doctor Stine, his patients, Faussel, all of them. He had kept them on this planet, and now they were dead. Every one of them. Dead.

Murderer!

XIV

Life was ended. Brion's mind contained nothing but despair and the pain of irretrievable loss. If his brain had been completely the master of his body he would have died there, for at that moment there was no will to live. Unaware of this, his heart continued to beat and the regular motion of his lungs drew in the dreadful sweetness of the smoke-tainted air. With automatic directness his body lived on.

"What you gonna do?" Telt asked, even his natural exuberation stilled by this. Brion only shook his head as the words penetrated. What could he do? What could possibly be done?

"Follow me," a voice said in guttural Disan through the opening of a rear window. The speaker was lost in the crowd before they could turn. Aware now, Brion saw a native move away from the edge of the crowd and turn to look in their direction. It was Ulv.

"Turn the car—that way!" He punched Telt's arm and pointed. "Do it slowly and don't draw any attention to us." For a moment there was hope, which he kept himself from considering. The building was gone, and the people in it all dead. That fact had to be faced.

"What's going on?" Telt asked. "Who was that talked in the window?"

"A native—that one up ahead. He saved my life in the desert, and I think he is on our side. Even though he's a native Disan, he can understand facts that the magter can't. He knows what will happen to this planet." Brion was talking to fill his brain with words so he wouldn't begin to have hope. There was no hope possible.

Ulv moved slowly and naturally through the streets, never looking back. They followed, as far behind as they dared, yet still keeping him in sight. Fewer people were about here among the deserted offworld storehouses. Ulv vanished into one of these; LIGHT METALS TRUST LTD., the sign read above the door. Telt slowed the car.

"Don't stop here," Brion said. "Drive around the corner, and pull up."

Brion climbed out of the car with an ease he did not feel. No one was in sight now, in either direction. Walking slowly back to the corner, he checked the street they had just left. Hot, silent and empty.

A sudden blackness appeared where the door of the warehouse had been, and the sudden flickering motion of a hand. Brion signaled Telt to start, and jumped into the already moving sand car.

"Into that open door—quickly, before anyone sees us!" The car rumbled down a ramp into the dark interior and the door slid shut behind them.

"Ulv! What is it? Where are you?" Brion called, blinking in the murky interior. A grey form appeared beside him.

"I am here."

"Did you—" There was no way to finish the sentence.

"I heard of the raid. The magter called together all of us they could to help them carry explosive. I went along. I could not stop them, and there was no time to warn anyone in the building."

"Then they are all dead?"

"Yes," Ulv nodded. "All except one. I knew I could perhaps save one; I was not sure who. So I took the woman you were with in the desert—she is here now. She was hurt, but not badly, when I brought her out."

Guilty relief flooded through Brion. He shouldn't exult, not with the death of everyone in the Foundation still fresh in his mind. But at that instant he was happy.

"Let me see her," he said to Ulv. He was seized by the sudden fear that there might be a mistake. Perhaps Ulv had saved a different woman.

Ulv led the way across the empty loading bay. Brion followed closely, fighting down the temptation to tell him to hurry. When he saw that Ulv was heading towards an office in the far wall, he could control himself no longer and ran on ahead.

It was Lea, lying unconscious on a couch. Sweat beaded her face and she moaned and stirred without opening her eyes.

"I gave her *sover*, then wrapped her in cloth so no one would know," Ulv said.

Telt was close behind them, looking in through the open door.

"*Sover* is a drug they take from one of their plants," he said. "We got a lot of experience with it. A little makes a good knock-out drug, but it's deadly poison in large doses. I got the antidote in the car; wait and I'll get it." He went out.

Brion sat next to Lea and wiped her face clean of dirt and perspiration. The dark shadows under her eyes were almost black now and her elfin face seemed even thinner. But she was alive—that was the important thing.

Some of the tension drained away from Brion and he could think again. There was still the job to do. After this last experience Lea should be in a hospital bed. But this was impossible. He would have to drag her to her feet and put her back to work. The answer might still be found. Each second ticked away another fraction of the planet's life.

"Good as new in a minute," Telt said, banging down the heavy med box. He watched intently as Ulv left the room. "Hys should know about this renegade. Might be useful as a spy, or for information—though of course it's too late now to do anything, so the hell with it." He pulled a pistol-shaped hypodermic gun from the box and dialed a number on the side. "Now, if you'll roll her sleeve up I'll bring her back to life." He pressed the bell-shaped sterilizing muzzle against her skin and pulled the trigger. The hypo gun hummed briefly, ending its cycle with a loud click.

"Does it work fast?" Brion asked.

"Couple of minutes. Just let her be and she'll come to by herself."

Ulv was in the doorway. "Killer!" he hissed. His blowgun was in his hand, half raised to his mouth.

"He's been in the car—he's seen it!" Telt shouted and grabbed for his gun.

Brion sprang between them, raising his hands. "Stop it! No more killing!" he shouted in Disan. Then he shook his fist at Telt. "Fire that gun and I'll stuff it down your throat. I'll handle this." He turned to face Ulv, who hadn't brought the blowgun any closer to his lips. This was a good sign—the Disan was still uncertain.

"You have seen the body in the car, Ulv. So you must have seen that it is that of a magter. I killed him myself, because I would rather kill one, or ten, or even a hundred men than have everyone on this planet destroyed. I killed him in a fair fight and now I am going to examine his body. There is something very strange and different about the magter, you know that yourself. If I can find out what it is, perhaps we can make them stop this war, and not bomb Nyjord."

Ulv was still angry, but he lowered the blowgun a little. "I wish there were no offworlders," he said. "I wish that none of you had ever come. Nothing was wrong until you started coming. The magter were the strongest, and they killed; but they also helped. Now they want to fight a war with your weapons, and for this you are going to kill my world. And you want me to help you!"

"Not me—yourself!" Brion said wearily. "There's no going back, that's the one thing we can't do. Maybe Dis would have been better off without offplanet contact. Maybe not. In any case, you have to forget about that. You have contact now with the rest of the galaxy, for better or for worse. You've got a problem to solve, and I'm here to help you solve it."

Seconds ticked by as Ulv, unmoving, fought with questions that were novel to his life. Could killing stop death? Could he help his people by helping strangers to fight and kill them? His world had changed and he didn't like it. He must make a giant effort to change with it.

Abruptly, he pushed the blowgun into a thong at his waist, turned and strode out.

"Too much for my nerves," Telt said, settling his gun back in the holster. "You don't know how happy I'm gonna be when this whole damn thing is over. Even if the planet goes bang, I don't care. I'm finished." He walked out to the sand car, keeping a careful eye on the Disan crouched against the wall.

Brion turned back to Lea, whose eyes were open, staring at the ceiling. He went to her.

"Running," she said, and her voice had a toneless emptiness that screamed louder than any emotion. "They ran by the open door of my room and I could see them when they killed Dr. Stine. Just butchered him like an animal, chopping him down. Then one came into the room and that's all I remember." She turned her head slowly and looked at Brion. "What happened? Why am I here?"

"They're ... dead," he told her. "All of them. After the raid the Disans blew up the building. You're the only one that survived. That was Ulv who came into your room, the Disan we met in the desert. He brought you away and hid you here in the city."

"When do we leave?" she asked in the same empty tones, turning her face to the wall. "When do we get off this planet?"

"Today is the last day. The deadline is midnight. Krafft will have a ship pick us up when we are ready. But we still have our job to do. I've got that body. You're going to have to examine it. We must find out about the magter...."

"Nothing can be done now except leave." Her voice was a dull monotone. "There is only so much that a person can do, and I've done it. Please have the ship come; I want to leave now."

Brion bit his lip in helpless frustration. Nothing seemed to penetrate the apathy into which she had sunk. Too much shock, too much terror, in too short a time. He took her chin in his hand and turned her head to face him. She didn't resist, but her eyes were shining with tears; tears trickled down her cheeks.

"Take me home, Brion, please take me home."

He could only brush her sodden hair back from her face, and force himself to smile at her. The moments of time were running out, faster and faster, and he no longer knew what to do. The examination had to be made—yet he couldn't force her. He looked for the med box and saw that Telt had taken it back to the sand car. There might be something in it that could help—a tranquilizer perhaps.

Telt had some of his instruments open on the chart table and was examining a tape with a pocket magnifier when Brion entered. He jumped nervously and put the tape behind his back, then relaxed when he saw who it was.

"I thought you were the creepie out there, coming for a look," he whispered. "Maybe you trust him—but I can't afford to. Can't even use the radio. I'm getting out of here now. I have to tell Hys!"

"Tell him what?" Brion asked sharply. "What is all the mystery about?"

Telt handed him the magnifier and tape. "Look at that—recording tape from my scintillation counter. Red verticals are five-minute intervals, the wiggly black horizontal line is the radioactivity level. All this where the line goes up and down, that's when we were driving out to the attack. Varying hot level of the rock and ground."

"What's the big peak in the middle?"

"That coincides exactly with our visit to the house of horrors! When we went through the hole in the bottom of the tower!" He couldn't keep the excitement out of his voice.

"Does it mean that..."

"I don't know. I'm not sure. I have to compare it with the other tapes back at base. It could be the stone of the tower—some of these heavy rocks have got a

high natural count. There maybe could be a box of instruments there with fluorescent dials. Or it might be one of those tactical atom bombs they threw at us already. Some arms runner sold them a few."

"Or it could be the cobalt bombs?"

"It could be," Telt said, packing his instruments swiftly. "A badly shielded bomb, or an old one with a crack in the skin, could give a trace like that. Just a little radon leaking out would do it."

"Why don't you call Hys on the radio and let him know?"

"I don't want Granddaddy Krafft's listening posts to hear about it. This is our job—if I'm right. And I have to check my old tapes to make sure. But it's gonna be worth a raid, I can feel that in my bones. Let's unload your corpse." He helped Brion with the clumsy, wrapped bundle, then slipped into the driver's seat.

"Hold it," Brion said. "Do you have anything in the med box I can use for Lea? She seems to have cracked. Not hysterical, but withdrawn. Won't listen to reason, won't do anything but lie there and ask to go home."

"Got the potion here," Telt said, cracking the med box. "Slaughter-syndrome is what our medic calls it. Hit a lot of our boys. Grow up all your life hating the idea of violence, and it goes rough when you have to start killing people. Guys break up, break down, go to pieces lots of different ways. The medic mixed up this stuff. Don't know how it works, probably tranquilizers and some of the cortex drugs. But it peels off recent memories. Maybe for the last ten, twelve hours. You can't get upset about what you don't remember." He pulled out a sealed package. "Directions on the box. Good luck."

"Luck," Brion said, and shook the technician's calloused hand. "Let me know if the traces are strong enough to be bombs." He checked the street to make sure it was clear, then pressed the door button. The sand car churned out into the brilliant sunshine and was gone, the throb of its motor dying in the distance. Brion closed the door and went back to Lea. Ulv was still crouched against the wall.

There was a one-shot disposable hypodermic in the box. Lea made no protest when he broke the seal and pressed the needle against her arm. She sighed and her eyes closed again.

When he saw she was resting easily, he dragged in the tarpaulin-wrapped body of the magter. A work-bench ran along one wall and he struggled the corpse up onto it. He unwrapped the tarpaulin and the sightless eyes stared accusingly up into his.

Using his knife, Brion cut away the loose, blood-soaked clothing. Strapped under the clothes, around the man's waist, was the familiar collection of Disan artifacts. This could have significance either way. Human or humanoid, the creature would still have to live on Dis. Brion threw it aside, along with the clothing. Nude, pierced, bloody, the corpse lay before him.

In every external physical detail the man was human.

Brion's theory was becoming more preposterous with each discovery. If the magter weren't alien, how could he explain their complete lack of emotions? A mutation of some kind? He didn't see how it was possible. There *had* to be something alien about the dead man before him. The future of a world rested on this flimsy hope. If Telt's lead to the bombs proved to be false, there would be no hope left at all.

Lea was still unconscious when he looked at her again. There was no way of telling how long the coma would last. He would probably have to waken her out of it, but he didn't want to do it too early. It took an effort to control his impatience, even though he knew the drug needed time in which to work. He finally decided on at least a minimum of an hour before he should try to disturb her. That would be noon—twelve hours before destruction.

One thing he should do was to get in touch with Professor-Commander Krafft. Maybe it was being defeatist, but he had to make sure that they had a way off this planet if the mission failed. Krafft had installed a relay radio that would forward calls from his personal set. If this relay had been in the Foundation building, contact was broken. This had to be found out before it was too late. Brion thumbed on his radio and sent the call. The reply came back instantly.

"This is fleet communications. Will you please keep this circuit open? Commander Krafft is waiting for this call and it is being put directly through to him now." Krafft's voice broke in while the operator was still talking.

"Who is making this call—is it anyone from the Foundation?" The old man's voice was shaky with emotion.

"Brandd here. I have Lea Morees with me...."

"No more? Are there no other survivors from the disaster that destroyed your building?"

"That's it, other than us it's a ... complete loss. With the building and all the instruments gone, I have no way to contact our ship in orbit. Can you arrange to get us out of here if necessary?"

"Give me your location. A ship is coming now—"

"I don't need a ship now," Brion interrupted. "Don't send it until I call. If there is a way to stop your destruction I'll find it. So I'm staying—to the last minute if necessary."

Krafft was silent. There was only the crackle of an open mike and the sound of breathing. "That is your decision," he said finally. "I'll have a ship standing by. But won't you let us take Miss Morees out now?"

"No. I need her here. We are still working, looking for—"

"What answer can you find that could possibly avert destruction now?" His tone was between hope and despair. Brion couldn't help him.

"If I succeed—you'll know. Otherwise, that will be the end of it. End of Transmission." He switched the radio off.

Lea was sleeping easily when he looked at her, and there was still a good part of the hour left before he could wake her. How could he put it to use? She

would need tools, instruments to examine the corpse, and there were certainly none here. Perhaps he could find some in the ruins of the Foundation building. With this thought he had the sudden desire to see the wreckage up close. There might be other survivors. He had to find out. If he could talk to the men he had seen working there....

Ulv was still crouched against the wall in the outer room. He looked up angrily when Brion came over, but said nothing.

"Will you help me again?" Brion asked. "Stay and watch the girl while I go out. I'll be back at noon." Ulv didn't answer. "I am still looking for the way to save Dis," Brion added.

"Go—I'll watch the girl!" Ulv spat words in impotent fury. "I do not know what to do. You may be right. Go. She will be safe with me."

Brion slipped out into the deserted street and, half running, half walking, made his way towards the rubble that had been the Cultural Relationships Foundation. He used a different course from the one they had come by, striking first towards the outer edge of the city. Once there, he could swing and approach from the other side, so there would be no indication where he had come from. The magter might be watching and he didn't want to lead them to Lea and the stolen body.

Turning a corner, he saw a sand car stopped in the street ahead. There was something familiar about the lines of it. It could be the one he and Telt had used, but he wasn't sure. He looked around, but the dusty, packed-dirt street was white and empty, shimmering in silence under the sun. Staying close to the wall and watching carefully, Brion slipped towards the car. When he came close behind it he was positive it was the one he had been in the night before. What was it doing here?

Silence and heat filled the street. Windows and doors were empty, and there was no motion in their shadows. Putting his foot on a bogey wheel, he reached up and grabbed the searing metal rim of the open window. He pulled himself up and stared at Telt's smiling face.

Smiling in death. The lips pulled back to reveal the grinning teeth, the eyes bursting from the head, the features swollen and contorted from the deadly poison. A tiny, tufted dart of wood stuck in the brown flesh on the side of his neck.

XV

Brion hurled himself backward and sprawled flat in the dust and filth of the road. No poison dart sought him out; the empty silence still reigned. Telt's murderers had come and gone. Moving quickly, using the bulk of the car as a shield, he opened the door and slipped inside.

They had done a thorough job of destruction. All of the controls had been battered into uselessness, the floor was a junk heap of crushed equipment, intertwined with loops of recording tape bulging like mechanical intestines. A gutted machine, destroyed like its driver.

It was easy enough to reconstruct what had happened. The car had been seen when they entered the city—probably by some of the magter who had destroyed the Foundation building. They had not seen where it had gone, or Brion would surely be dead by now. But they must have spotted it when Telt tried to leave the city—and stopped it in the most effective way possible, a dart through the open window into the unsuspecting driver's neck.

Telt dead! The brutal impact of the man's death had driven all thought of its consequences from Brion's mind. Now he began to realize. Telt had never sent word of his discovery of the radioactive trace to the Nyjord army. He had been afraid to use the radio, and had wanted to tell Hys in person, and to show him the tape. Only now the tape was torn and mixed with all the others, the brain that could have analyzed it dead.

Brion looked at the dangling entrails of the radio and spun for the door. Running swiftly and erratically, he fled from the sand car. His own survival and the possible survival of Dis depended on his not being seen near it. He must contact Hys and pass on the information. Until he did that, he was the only offworlder on Dis who knew which magter tower might contain the world-destroying bombs.

Once out of sight of the sand car he went more slowly, wiping the sweat from his streaming face. He hadn't been seen leaving the car, and he wasn't being followed. The streets here weren't familiar, but he checked his direction by the sun and walked at a steady fast pace towards the destroyed building. More of the native Disans were in the streets now. They all noticed him, some even stopped and scowled fiercely at him. With his emphatic awareness he felt their anger and hatred. A knot of men radiated death, and he put his hand on his gun as he passed them. Two of them had their blowguns ready, but didn't use them. By the time he had turned the next corner he was soaked with nervous perspiration.

Ahead was the rubble of the destroyed building. Grounded next to it was the tapered form of a spacer's pinnace. Two men had come from the open lock and were standing at the edge of the burnt area.

Brion's boots grated loudly on the broken wreckage. The men turned quickly towards him, guns raised. Both of them carried ion rifles. They relaxed when they saw his offworld clothes.

"Bloody damned savages!" one of them growled. He was a heavy-planet man, a squashed-down column of muscle and gristle, whose head barely reached Brion's chest. A pushed-back cap had the crossed slide-rule symbol of ship's computer man.

"Can't blame them, I guess," the second man said. He wore purser's insignia. His features were different, but with the same compacted body the two men were as physically alike as twins. Probably from the same home planet. "They're gonna get their whole world blown out from under them at midnight. Looks as if the poor slob in the streets finally realized what is happening. Hope we're in jump-space by then. I saw Estrada's World get it, and I don't want to see that again, not twice in one lifetime!"

The computer man was looking closely at Brion, head tilted sideways to see his face. "You need transportation offworld?" he asked. "We're the last ship at the port, and we're going to boil out of here as soon as the rest of our cargo is aboard. We'll give you a lift if you need it."

Only by a tremendous effort at control did Brion conceal the destroying sorrow that overwhelmed him when he looked at that shattered wasteland, the graveyard of so many. "No," he said. "That won't be necessary. I'm in touch with the blockading fleet and they'll pick me up before midnight."

"You from Nyjord?" the purser growled.

"No," Brion said, still only half aware of the men. "But there is trouble with my own ship." He realized that they were looking intently at him, that he owed them some kind of explanation. "I thought I could find a way to stop the war. Now ... I'm not so sure." He hadn't intended to be so frank with the spacemen, but the words had been uppermost in his thoughts and had simply slipped out.

The computer man started to say something, but his shipmate speared him in the side with his elbow. "We blast soon—and I don't like the way these Disans are looking at us. The captain said to find out what caused the fire, then get the hell back. So let's go."

"Don't miss your ship," the computer man said to Brion, and he started for the pinnace. Then he hesitated and turned. "Sure there's nothing we can do for you?"

Sorrow would accomplish nothing. Brion fought to sweep the dregs of emotion from his mind and to think clearly. "You can help me," he said. "I could use a scalpel or any other surgical instrument you might have." Lea would need those. Then he remembered Telt's undelivered message. "Do you have a portable radio transceiver? I can pay you for it."

The computer man vanished inside the rocket and reappeared a minute later with a small package. "There's a scalpel and a magnetized tweezers in here—all I could find in the med kit. Hope they'll do." He reached inside and swung

out the metal case of a self-contained transceiver. "Take this, it's got plenty of range, even on the longer frequencies."

He raised his hand at Brion's offer to pay. "My donation," he said. "If you can save this planet I'll give you the whole pinnace as well. We'll tell the captain we lost the radio in some trouble with the natives. Isn't that right, Moneybags?" He prodded the purser in the chest with a finger that would have punched a hole through a weaker man.

"I read you loud and clear," the purser said. "I'll make out an invoice so stating, back in the ship." They were both in the pinnace then, and Brion had to move fast to get clear of the takeoff blast.

A sense of obligation—the spacemen had felt it too. The realization of this raised Brion's spirits a bit as he searched through the rubble for anything useful. He recognized part of a wall still standing as a corner of the laboratory. Poking through the ruins, he unearthed broken instruments and a single, battered case that had barely missed destruction. Inside was the binocular microscope, the right tube bent, its lenses cracked and obscured. The left eyepiece still seemed to be functioning. Brion carefully put it back in the case.

He looked at his watch. It was almost noon. These few pieces of equipment would have to do for the dissection. Watched suspiciously by the onlooking Disans, he started back to the warehouse. It was a long, circuitous walk, since he didn't dare give any clues to his destination. Only when he was positive he had not been observed or followed did he slip through the building's entrance, locking the door behind him.

Lea's frightened eyes met his when he went into the office. "A friendly smile here among the cannibals," she called. Her strained expression gave the lie to the cheeriness of her words. "What has happened? Since I woke up, the great stone face over there"—she pointed to Ulv—"has been telling me exactly nothing."

"What's the last thing you can remember?" Brion asked carefully. He didn't want to tell her too much, lest this bring on the shock again. Ulv had shown great presence of mind in not talking to her.

"If you must know," Lea said, "I remember quite a lot, Brion Brandd. I shan't go into details, since this sort of thing is best kept from the natives. For the record then, I can recall going to sleep after you left. And nothing since then. It's weird. I went to sleep in that lumpy hospital bed and woke up on this couch, feeling simply terrible. With *him* just sitting there and scowling at me. Won't you please tell me what is going on?"

A partial truth was best, saving all of the details that he could for later. "The magter attacked the Foundation building," he said. "They are getting angry at all offworlders now. You were still knocked out by a sleeping drug, so Ulv helped bring you here. It's afternoon now—"

"Of the last day?" She sounded horrified. "While I'm playing Sleeping Beauty the world is coming to an end! Was anyone hurt in the attack? Or killed?"

"There were a number of casualties—and plenty of trouble," Brion said. He had to get her off the subject. Walking over to the corpse, he threw back the cover from its face. "But this is more important right now. It's one of the magter. I have a scalpel and some other things here—will you perform an autopsy?"

Lea huddled back on the couch, her arms around herself, looking chilled in spite of the heat of the day. "What happened to the people at the building?" she asked in a thin voice. The injection had removed her memories of the tragedy, but echoes of the strain and shock still reverberated in her mind and body. "I feel so ... exhausted. Please tell me what happened. I have the feeling you're hiding something."

Brion sat next to her and took her hands in his, not surprised to find them cold. Looking into her eyes, he tried to give her some of his strength. "It wasn't very nice," he said. "You were shaken up by it, I imagine that's why you feel the way you do now. But—Lea, you'll have to take my word for this. Don't ask any more questions. There's nothing we can do now about it. But we can still find out about the magter. Will you examine the corpse?"

She started to ask something, then changed her mind. When she dropped her eyes Brion felt the thin shiver that went through her body. "There's something terribly wrong," she said. "I know that. I guess I'll have to take your word that it's best not to ask questions. Help me up, will you, darling? My legs are absolutely liquid."

Leaning on him, with his arm around her supporting most of her weight, she went slowly across to the corpse. She looked down and shuddered. "Not what you would call a natural death," she said. Ulv watched intently as she took the scalpel out of its holder. "You don't have to look at this," she told him in halting Disan. "Not if you don't want to."

"I want to," he told her, not taking his eyes from the body. "I have never seen a magter dead before, or without covering, like an ordinary person." He continued to stare fixedly.

"Find me some drinking water, will you, Brion?" Lea said. "And spread the tarp under the body. These things are quite messy."

After drinking the water she seemed stronger, and could stand without holding onto the table with both hands. Placing the tip of the scalpel just below the magter's breast bone, she made the long post-mortem incision down to the pubic symphysis. The great, body-length wound gaped open like a red mouth. Across the table Ulv shuddered but didn't avert his eyes.

One by one she removed the internal organs. Once she looked up at Brion, then quickly returned to work. The silence stretched on and on until Brion had to break it.

"Tell me, can't you? Have you found out anything?"

His words snapped the thin strand of her strength, and she staggered back to the couch and collapsed onto it. Her bloodstained hands hung over the side, making a strangely terrible contrast to the whiteness of her skin.

"I'm sorry, Brion," she said. "But there's nothing, nothing at all. There are minor differences, organic changes I've never seen before—his liver is tremendous, for one thing. But changes like this are certainly consistent within the pattern of homo sapiens as adapted to a different planet. He's a man. Changed, adapted, modified—but still just as human as you or I."

"How can you be sure?" Brion broke in. "You haven't examined him completely, have you?" She shook her head. "Then go on. The other organs. His brain. A microscopic examination. Here!" he said, pushing the microscope case towards her with both hands.

She dropped her head onto her forearms and sobbed. "Leave me alone, can't you! I'm tired and sick and fed up with this awful planet. Let them die. I don't care! Your theory is false, useless. Admit that! And let me wash the filth from my hands...." Sobbing drowned out her words.

Brion stood over her and drew a shuddering breath. Was he wrong? He didn't dare think about that. He had to go on. Looking down at the thinness of her bent back, with the tiny projections of her spine showing through the thin cloth, he felt an immense pity—a pity he couldn't surrender to. This thin, helpless, frightened woman was his only resource. She had to work. He had to *make* her work.

Ihjel had done it—used projective empathy to impress his emotions upon Brion. Now Brion must do it with Lea. He had had some sessions in the art, but not nearly enough to make him proficient. Nevertheless he had to try.

Strength was what Lea needed. Aloud he said simply, "You can do it. You have the will and the strength to finish." And silently his mind cried out the order to obey, to share his power now that hers was drained and finished.

Only when she lifted her face and he saw the dried tears did he realize that he had succeeded. "You will go on?" he asked quietly.

Lea merely nodded and rose to her feet. She shuffled like a sleepwalker jerked along by invisible strings. Her strength wasn't her own, and the situation reminded him unhappily of that last event of the Twenties when he had experienced the same kind of draining activity. She wiped her hands roughly on her clothes and opened the microscope case.

"The slides are all broken," she said.

"This will do," Brion told her, crashing his heel through the glass partition. Shards tinkled and crashed to the floor. He took some of the bigger pieces and broke them to rough squares that would fit under the clips on the stage. Lea accepted them without a word. Putting a drop of the magter's blood on the slide, she bent over the eyepiece.

Her hands shook when she tried to adjust the focusing. Using low power, she examined the specimen, squinting through the angled tube. Once she turned the sub-stage mirror a bit to catch the light streaming in the window. Brion stood behind her, fists clenched, forceably controlling his anxiety. "What do you see?" he finally blurted out.

"Phagocytes, platelets ... leucocytes ... everything seems normal." Her voice

was dull, exhausted, her eyes blinking with fatigue as she stared into the tube.

Anger at defeat burned through Brion. Even faced with failure, he refused to accept it. He reached over her shoulder and savagely twisted the turret of microscope until the longest lens was in position. "If you can't see anything—try the high power! It's there—I know it's there! I'll get you a tissue specimen." He turned back to the disemboweled cadaver.

His back was turned and he did not see that sudden stiffening of her shoulders, or the sudden eagerness that seized her fingers as they adjusted the focus. But he did feel the wave of emotion that welled from her, impinging directly on his empathetic sense. "What is it?" he called to her, as if she had spoken aloud.

"Something ... something here," she said, "in this leucocyte. It's not normal structure, but it's familiar. I've seen something like it before, but I just can't remember." She turned away from the microscope and unthinkingly pressed her gory knuckles to her forehead. "I know I've seen it before."

Brion squinted into the deserted microscope and made out a dim shape in the center of the field. It stood out sharply when he focused—the white, jellyfish shape of a single-celled leucocyte. To his untrained eye there was nothing unusual about it. He couldn't know what was strange, when he had no idea of what was normal.

"Do you see those spherical green shapes grouped together?" Lea asked. Before Brion could answer she gasped, "I remember now!" Her fatigue was forgotten in her excitement. "*Icerya purchasi*, that was the name, something like that. It's a coccid, a little scale insect. It had those same shapes collected together within its individual cells."

"What do they mean? What is the connection with Dis?"

"I don't know," she said; "it's just that they look so similar. And I never saw anything like this in a human cell before. In the coccids, the green particles grow into a kind of yeast that lives within the insect. Not a parasite, but a real symbiote...."

Her eyes opened wide as she caught the significance of her own words. A symbiote—and Dis was the world where symbiosis and parasitism had become more advanced and complex than on any other planet. Lea's thoughts spun around this fact and chewed at the fringes of the logic. Brion could sense her concentration and absorption. He did nothing to break the mood. Her hands were clenched, her eyes staring unseeingly at the wall as her mind raced.

Brion and Ulv were quiet, watching her, waiting for her conclusions. The pieces were falling into shape at last.

Lea opened her clenched hands and smoothed them on her sodden skirt. She blinked and turned to Brion. "Is there a tool box here?" she asked.

Her words were so unexpected that Brion could not answer for a moment. Before he could say anything she spoke again.

"Not hand tools; that would take too long. Could you find anything like a

power saw? That would be ideal." She turned back to the microscope, and he didn't try to question her. Ulv was still looking at the body of the magter and had understood nothing of what they had said.

Brion went out into the loading bay. There was nothing he could use on the ground floor, so he took the stairs to the floor above. A corridor here passed by a number of rooms. All of the doors were locked, including one with the hopeful sign TOOL ROOM on it. He battered at the metal door with his shoulder without budging it. As he stepped back to look for another way in, he glanced at his watch.

Two o'clock! In ten hours the bombs would fall on Dis.

The need for haste tore at him. Yet there could be no noise—someone in the street might hear it. He quickly stripped off his shirt and wrapped it in a loose roll around the barrel of his gun, extending it in a loose tube in front of the barrel. Holding the rolled cloth in his left hand, he jammed the gun up tight against the door, the muzzle against the lock. The single shot was only a dull thud, inaudible outside of the building. Pieces of broken mechanism jarred and rattled inside the lock and the door swung open.

When he came back Lea was standing by the body. He held the small power saw with a rotary blade. "Will this do?" he asked. "Runs on its own battery; almost fully charged too."

"Perfect," she answered. "You're both going to have to help me." She switched into the Disan language. "Ulv, would you find some place where you can watch the street without being seen? Signal me when it is empty. I'm afraid this saw is going to make a lot of noise."

Ulv nodded and went out into the bay, where he climbed a heap of empty crates so he could peer through the small windows set high in the wall. He looked carefully in both directions, then waved to her to go ahead.

"Stand to one side and hold the cadaver's chin, Brion," she said. "Hold it firmly so the head doesn't shake around when I cut. This is going to be a little gruesome. I'm sorry. But it'll be the fastest way to cut the bone." The saw bit into the skull.

Once Ulv waved them into silence, and shrank back himself into the shadows next to the window. They waited impatiently until he gave them the sign to continue again. Brion held steady while the saw cut a circle completely around the skull.

"Finished," Lea said and the saw dropped from her limp fingers to the floor. She massaged life back into her hands before she finished the job. Carefully and delicately she removed the cap of bone from the magter's head, exposing his brain to the shaft of light from the window.

"You were right all the time, Brion," she said. "There is your alien."

XVI

Ulv joined them as they looked down at the exposed brain of the magter. The thing was so clearly evident that even Ulv noticed it.

"I have seen dead animals and my people dead with their heads open, but I have never seen anything like that before," he said.

"What is it?" Brion asked.

"The invader, the alien you were looking for," Lea told him.

The magter's brain was only two-thirds of what would have been its normal size. Instead of filling the skull completely, it shared the space with a green, amorphous shape. This was ridged somewhat like a brain, but the green shape had still darker nodules and extensions. Lea took her scalpel and gently prodded the dark moist mass.

"It reminds me very much of something that I've seen before on Earth," she said. "The green-fly—*Drepanosiphum platanoides*—and an unusual organ it has, called the pseudova. Now that I have seen this growth in the magter's skull, I can think of a positive parallel. The fly *Drepanosiphum* also had a large green organ, only it fills half of the body cavity instead of the head. Its identity puzzled biologists for years, and they had a number of complex theories to explain it. Finally someone managed to dissect and examine it. The pseudova turned out to be a living plant, a yeastlike growth that helps with the green-fly's digestion. It produces enzymes that enable the fly to digest the great amounts of sugar it gets from plant juice."

"That's not unusual," Brion said, puzzled. "Termites and human beings are a couple of other creatures whose digestion is helped by internal flora. What's the difference in the green-fly?"

"Reproduction, mainly. All the other gut-living plants have to enter the host and establish themselves as outsiders, permitted to remain as long as they are useful. The green-fly and its yeast plant have a permanent symbiotic relationship that is essential to the existence of both. The plant spores appear in many places throughout the fly's body—but they are *always* in the germ cells. Every egg cell has some, and every egg that grows to maturity is infected with the plant spores. The continuation of the symbiosis is unbroken and guaranteed."

"Do you think those green spheres in the magter's blood cells could be the same kind of thing?" Brion asked.

"I'm sure of it," Lea said. "It must be the same process. There are probably green spheres throughout the magters' bodies, spores or offspring of those things in their brains. Enough will find their way to the germ cells to make sure that every young magter is infected at birth. While the child is growing, so is the symbiote. Probably a lot faster, since it seems to be a simpler

organism. I imagine it is well established in the brain pan within the first six months of the infant's life."

"But why?" Brion asked. "What does it do?"

"I'm only guessing now, but there is plenty of evidence that gives us an idea of its function. I'm willing to bet that the symbiote itself is not a simple organism, it's probably an amalgam of plant and animal like most of the other creatures on Dis. The thing is just too complex to have developed since mankind has been on this planet. The magter must have caught the symbiotic infection eating some Disan animal. The symbiote lived and flourished in its new environment, well protected by a bony skull in a long-lived host. In exchange for food, oxygen and comfort, the brain-symbiote must generate hormones and enzymes that enable the magter to survive. Some of these might aid digestion, enabling the magter to eat any plant or animal life they can lay their hands on. The symbiote might produce sugars, scavenge the blood of toxins—there are so many things it could do. Things it must have done, since the magter are obviously the dominant life form on this planet. They paid a high price for the symbiote, but it didn't matter to race survival until now. Did you notice that the magter's brain is no smaller than normal?"

"It must be—or how else could that brain-symbiote fit in inside the skull with it?" Brion said.

"If the magter's total brain were smaller in volume than normal it could fit into the remaining space in the cranial hollow. But the brain is full-sized—it is just that part of it is missing, absorbed by the symbiote."

"The frontal lobes," Brion said with sudden realization. "This hellish growth has performed a prefrontal lobotomy!"

"It's done even more than that," Lea said, separating the convolutions of the gray matter with her scalpel to uncover a green filament beneath. "These tendrils penetrate further back into the brain, but always remain in the cerebrum. The cerebellum appears to be untouched. Apparently just the higher functions of mankind have been interfered with, selectively. Destruction of the frontal lobes made the magter creatures without emotions or ability for really abstract thought. Apparently they survived better without these. There must have been some horrible failures before the right balance was struck. The final product is a man-plant-animal symbiote that is admirably adapted for survival on this disaster world. No emotions to cause complications or desires that might interfere with pure survival. Complete ruthlessness—mankind has always been strong on this anyway, so it didn't take much of a push."

"The other Disans, like Ulv here, managed to survive without turning into such a creature. So why was it necessary for the magter to go so far?"

"Nothing is necessary in evolution, you know that," Lea said. "Many variations are possible, and all the better ones continue. You might say that Ulv's people survive, but the magter survive better. If offworld contact hadn't been re-established, I imagine that the magter would slowly have become the

dominant race. Only they won't have the chance now. It looks as though they have succeeded in destroying both races with their suicidal urge."

"That's the part that doesn't make sense," Brion said. "The magter have survived and climbed right to the top of the evolutionary heap here. Yet they are suicidal. How does it happen they haven't been wiped out before this?"

"Individually, they have been aggressive to the point of suicide. They will attack anything and everything with the same savage lack of emotion. Luckily there are no bigger animals on this planet. So where they have died as individuals, their utter ruthlessness has guaranteed their survival as a group. Now they are faced with a problem that is too big for their half-destroyed minds to handle. Their personal policy has become their planetary policy—and that's never a very smart thing. They are like men with knives who have killed all the men who were only armed with stones. Now they are facing men with guns, and they are going to keep charging and fighting until they are all dead.

"It's a perfect case of the utter impartiality of the forces of evolution. Men infected by this Disan life form were the dominant creatures on this planet. The creature in the magters' brains was a true symbiote then, giving something and receiving something, making a union of symbiotes where all were stronger together than any could be separately. Now this is changed. The magter brain cannot understand the concept of racial death, in a situation where it must understand to be able to survive. Therefore the brain-creature is no longer a symbiote but a parasite."

"And as a parasite it must be destroyed!" Brion broke in. "We're not fighting shadows any more," he exulted. "We've found the enemy—and it's not the magter at all. Just a sort of glorified tapeworm that is too stupid to know when it is killing itself off. Does it have a brain—can it think?"

"I doubt it very much," Lea said. "A brain would be of absolutely no use to it. So even if it originally possessed reasoning powers they would be gone by now. Symbiotes or parasites that live internally like this always degenerate to an absolute minimum of functions."

"Tell me about it. What is this thing?" Ulv broke in, prodding the soft form of the brain-symbiote. He had heard all their excited talk but had not understood a word.

"Explain it to him, will you, Lea, as best you can," Brion said, looking at her, and he realized how exhausted she was. "And sit down while you do it; you're long overdue for a rest. I'm going to try—" He broke off when he looked at his watch.

It was after four in the afternoon—less than eight hours to go. What was he to do? Enthusiasm faded as he realized that only half of the problem was solved. The bombs would drop on schedule unless the Nyjorders could understand the significance of this discovery. Even if they understood, would it make any difference to them? The threat of the hidden cobalt bombs would not be changed.

With this thought came the guilty realization that he had forgotten completely about Telt's death. Even before he contacted the Nyjord fleet he must tell Hys and his rebel army what had happened to Telt and his sand car. Also about the radioactive traces. They couldn't be checked against the records now to see how important they might be, but Hys might make another raid on the strength of the suspicion. This call wouldn't take long, then he would be free to tackle Professor-Commander Krafft.

Carefully setting the transmitter on the frequency of the rebel army, he sent out a call to Hys. There was no answer. When he switched to receive all he heard was static.

There was always a chance the set was broken. He quickly twisted the transmitter to the frequency of his personal radio, then whistled in the microphone. The received signal was so loud that it hurt his ears. He tried to call Hys again, and was relieved to get a response this time.

"Brion Brandd here. Can you read me? I want to talk to Hys at once."

It came as a shock that it was Professor-Commander Krafft who answered.

"I'm sorry, Brion, but it's impossible to talk to Hys. We are monitoring his frequency and your call was relayed to me. Hys and his rebels lifted ship about half an hour ago, and are already on the way back to Nyjord. Are you ready to leave now? It will soon become dangerous to make any landings. Even now I will have to ask for volunteers to get you out of there."

Hys and the rebel army gone! Brion assimilated the thought. He had been thrown off balance when he realized he was talking to Krafft.

"If they're gone—well, then there's nothing I can do about it," he said. "I was going to call you, so I can talk to you now. Listen and try to understand. You must cancel the bombing. I've found out about the magter, found what causes their mental aberration. If we can correct that, we can stop them from attacking Nyjord—"

"Can they be corrected by midnight tonight?" Krafft broke in. He was abrupt and sounded almost angry. Even saints get tired.

"No, of course not." Brion frowned at the microphone, realizing the talk was going all wrong, but not knowing how to remedy it. "But it won't take too long. I have evidence here that will convince you that what I say is the truth."

"I believe you without seeing it, Brion." The trace of anger was gone from Krafft's voice now, and it was heavy with fatigue and defeat. "I'll admit you are probably right. A little while ago I admitted to Hys too that he was probably right in his original estimation of the correct way to tackle the problem of Dis. We have made a lot of mistakes, and in making them we have run out of time. I'm afraid that is the only fact that is relevant now. The bombs fall at twelve, and even then they may drop too late. A ship is already on its way from Nyjord with my replacement. I exceeded my authority by running a day past the maximum the technicians gave me. I realize now I was gambling the life of my own world in the vain hope I could save Dis. They can't be saved. They're dead. I won't hear any more about it."

"You must listen—"

"I must destroy the planet below me, that is what I must do. That fact will not be changed by anything you say. All the offworlders—other than your party—are gone. I'm sending a ship down now to pick you up. As soon as that ship lifts I am going to drop the first bombs. Now—tell me where you are so they can come for you."

"Don't threaten me, Krafft!" Brion shook his fist at the radio in an excess of anger. "You're a killer and a world destroyer—don't try to make yourself out as anything else. I have the knowledge to avert this slaughter and you won't listen to me. And I know where the cobalt bombs are—in the magter tower that Hys raided last night. Get those bombs and there is no need to drop any of your own!"

"I'm sorry, Brion. I appreciate what you're trying to do, but at the same time I know the futility of it. I'm not going to accuse you of lying, but do you realize how thin your evidence sounds from this end? First, a dramatic discovery of the cause of the magters' intransigency. Then, when that had no results, you suddenly remember that you know where the bombs are. The best-kept magter secret."

"I don't know for sure, but there is a very good chance it is so," Brion said, trying to repair his defenses. "Telt made readings, he had other records of radioactivity in this same magter keep—proof that something is there. But Telt is dead now, the records destroyed. Don't you see—" He broke off, realizing how vague and unprovable his case was. This was defeat.

The radio was silent, with just the hum of the carrier wave as Krafft waited for him to continue. When Brion did speak his voice was empty of all hope.

"Send your ship down," he said tiredly. "We're in a building that belonged to the Light Metals Trust, Ltd., a big warehouse of some kind. I don't know the address here, but I'm sure you have someone there who can find it. We'll be waiting for you. You win, Krafft."

He turned off the radio.

XVII

"Do you mean what you said, about giving up?" Lea asked. Brion realized that she had stopped talking to Ulv some time ago, and had been listening to his conversation with Krafft. He shrugged, trying to put his feeling into words.

"We've tried—and almost succeeded. But if they won't listen, what can we do? What can one man possibly do against a fleet loaded with H-bombs?"

As if in answer to the question, Ulv's voice drowned him out, the harsh Disan words slashing the silence of the room.

"Kill you, the enemy!" he said. "Kill you *umedvirk*!"

He shouted the last word and his hand flashed to his belt. In a single swift motion he lifted his blowgun and placed it to his lips. A tiny dart quivered in the already dead flesh of the creature in the magter's skull. The action had all the symbolism of a broken lance, the declaration of war.

"Ulv understands it a lot better than you might think," Lea said. "He knows things about symbiosis and mutualism that would get him a job as a lecturer in any university on Earth. He knows just what the brain-symbiote is and what it does. They even have a word for it, one that never appeared in our Disan language lessons. A life form that you can live with or cooperate with is called *medvirk*. One that works to destroy you is *umedvirk*. He also understands that life forms can change, and be *medvirk* or *umedvirk* at different times. He has just decided that the brain symbiote is *umedvirk* and he is out to kill it. So will the rest of the Disans as soon as he can show them the evidence and explain."

"You're sure of this?" Brion asked, interested in spite of himself.

"Positive. The Disans have an absolute attitude towards survival; you should realize that. Not the same as the magter, but not much different in the results. They will kill the brain-symbiotes, even if it means killing every magter who harbors one."

"If that is the case we can't leave now," Brion said. With these words it suddenly became clear what he had to do. "The ship is coming down now from the fleet. Get in it and take the body of the magter. I won't go."

"Where will you be?" she asked, shocked.

"Fighting the magter. My presence on the planet means that Krafft won't keep his threat to drop the bombs any earlier than the midnight deadline. That would be deliberately murdering me. I doubt if my presence past midnight will stop him, but it should keep the bombs away at least until then."

"What will you accomplish besides committing suicide?" Lea pleaded. "You just told me how a single man can't stop the bombs. What will happen to you at midnight?"

"I'll be dead—but in spite of that I can't run away. Not now. I must do

everything possible right up until the last instant. Ulv and I will go to the magter tower, try to find out if the bombs are there. He will fight on our side now. He may even know more about the bombs, things that he didn't want to tell me before. We can get help from his people. Some of them must know where the bombs are, being native to this planet."

Lea started to say something, but he rushed on, drowning out her words.

"You have just as big a job. Show the magter to Krafft, explain the significance of the brain-parasite to him. Try to get him to talk to Hys about the last raid. Try to get him to hold off the attack. I'll keep the radio with me and as soon as I know anything I'll call in. This is all last resort, finger in the dike kind of stuff, but it is all we can do. Because if we do nothing, it means the end of Dis."

Lea tried to argue with him, but he wouldn't listen to her. He only kissed her, and with a lightness he did not feel tried to convince her that everything would be all right. In their hearts they both knew it wouldn't be but they left it that way because it was the least painful solution.

A sudden rumbling shook the building and the windows darkened as a ship settled in the street outside. The Nyjord crew came in with guns pointed, alert for anything.

After a little convincing they took the cadaver, as well as Lea, when they lifted ship. Brion watched the spacer become a pinpoint in the sky and vanish. He tried to shake off the feeling that this was the last time he would see any of them.

"Let's get out of here fast," he told Ulv, picking up the radio, "before anyone comes around to see why the ship landed."

"What will you do?" Ulv asked as they went down the street towards the desert. "What can we do in the few hours we have left?" He pointed at the sun, nearing the horizon. Brion shifted the weight of the radio to his other hand before replying.

"Get to the magter tower we raided last night, that's the best chance. The bombs might be there.... Unless you know where the bombs are?"

Ulv shook his head. "I do not know, but some of my people may. We will capture a magter, then kill him, so they can all see the *umedvirk*. Then they will tell us everything they know."

"The tower first then, for bombs or a sample magter. What's the fastest way we can get there?"

Ulv frowned in thought. "If you can drive one of the cars the offworlders use, I know where there are some locked in buildings in this city. None of my people know how they are made to move."

"I can work them—let's go."

Chance was with them this time. The first sand car they found still had the keys in the lock. It was battery-powered, but contained a full charge. Much quieter than the heavy atomic cars, it sped smoothly out of the city and across the sand. Ahead of them the sun sank in a red wave of color. It was six

o'clock. By the time they reached the tower it was seven, and Brion's nerves felt as if they were writhing under his skin.

Even though it looked like suicide, attacking the tower brought blessed relief. It was movement and action, and for moments at a time he forgot the bombs hanging over his head.

The attack was nerve-rackingly anticlimactic. They used the main entrance, Ulv ranging soundlessly ahead. There was no one in sight. Once inside, they crept down towards the lower rooms where the radiation had been detected. Only gradually did they realize that the magter tower was completely empty.

"Everyone gone," Ulv grunted, sniffing the air in every room that they passed. "Many magter were here earlier, but they are gone now."

"Do they often desert their towers?" Brion asked.

"Never. I have never heard of it happening before. I can think of no reason why they should do a thing like this."

"Well, I can," Brion told him. "They would leave their home if they took something with them of greater value. The bombs. If the bombs were hidden here, they might move them after the attack." Sudden fear hit him. "Or they might move them because it is time to take them—to the launcher! Let's get out of here, the quickest way we can."

"I smell air from outside," Ulv said, "coming from down there. This cannot be, because the magter have no entrances this low in their towers."

"We blasted one in earlier—that could be it. Can you find it?"

Moonlight shone ahead as they turned an angle of the corridor, and stars were visible through the gaping opening in the wall.

"It looks bigger than it was," Brion said, "as if the magter had enlarged it." He looked through and saw the tracks on the sand outside. "As if they had enlarged it to bring something bulky up from below—and carried it away in whatever made those tracks!"

Using the opening themselves, they ran back to the sand car. Brion ground it fiercely around and turned the headlights on the tracks. There were the marks of a sand car's treads, half obscured by thin, unmarked wheel tracks. He turned off the lights and forced himself to move slowly and to do an accurate job. A quick glimpse at his watch showed him there were four hours left to go. The moonlight was bright enough to illuminate the tracks. Driving with one hand, he turned on the radio transmitter, already set for Krafft's wave length.

When the operator acknowledged his signal Brion reported what they had discovered and his conclusions. "Get that message to Commander Krafft now. I can't wait to talk to him—I'm following the tracks." He killed the transmission and stamped on the accelerator. The sand car churned and bounced down the track.

"They are going to the mountains," Ulv said some time later, as the tracks still pointed straight ahead. "There are caves there and many magter have been seen near them; that is what I have heard."

The guess was correct. Before nine o'clock the ground humped into a range of foothills, and the darker masses of mountains could be seen behind them, rising up to obscure the stars.

"Stop the car here," Ulv said, "The caves begin not too far ahead. There may be magter watching or listening, so we must go quietly."

Brion followed the deep-cut grooves, carrying the radio. Ulv came and went on both sides, silently as a shadow, scouting for hidden watchers. As far as he could discover there were none.

By nine-thirty Brion realized they had deserted the sand car too soon. The tracks wound on and on, and seemed to have no end. They passed some caves which Ulv pointed out to him, but the tracks never stopped. Time was running out and the nightmare stumbling through the darkness continued.

"More caves ahead," Ulv said, "Go quietly."

They came cautiously to the crest of a hill, as they had done so many times already, and looked into the shallow valley beyond. Sand covered the valley floor, and the light of the setting moon shone over the tracks at a flat angle, marking them off sharply as lines of shadow. They ran straight across the sandy valley and disappeared into the dark mouth of a cave on the far side.

Sinking back behind the hilltop, Brion covered the pilot light with his hand and turned on the transmitter. Ulv stayed above him, staring at the opening of the cave.

"This is an important message," Brion whispered into the mike. "Please record." He repeated this for thirty seconds, glancing at his watch to make sure of the time, since the seconds of waiting stretched to minutes in his brain. Then, as clearly as possible without raising his voice above a whisper, he told of the discovery of the tracks and the cave.

"... The bombs may or may not be in here, but we are going in to find out. I'll leave my personal transmitter here with the broadcast power turned on, so you can home on its signal. That will give you a directional beacon to find the cave. I'm taking the other radio in—it has more power. If we can't get back to the entrance I'll try a signal from inside. I doubt if you will hear it because of the rock, but I'll try. End of transmission. Don't try to answer me because I have the receiver turned off. There are no earphones on this set and the speaker would be too loud here."

He switched off, held his thumb on the button for an instant, then flicked it back on.

"Good-by Lea," he said, and killed the power for good.

They circled and reached the rocky wall of the cliff. Creeping silently in the shadows, they slipped up on the dark entrance of the cave. Nothing moved ahead and there was no sound from the entrance of the cave. Brion glanced at his watch and was instantly sorry.

Ten-thirty.

The last shelter concealing them was five metres from the cave. They started to rise, to rush the final distance, when Ulv suddenly waved Brion

down. He pointed to his nose, then to the cave. He could smell the magter there.

A dark figure separated itself from the greater darkness of the cave mouth. Ulv acted instantly. He stood up and his hand went to his mouth; air hissed faintly through the tube in his hand. Without a sound the magter folded and fell to the ground. Before the body hit, Ulv crouched low and rushed in. There was the sudden scuffling of feet on the floor, then silence.

Brion walked in, gun ready and alert, not knowing what he would find. His toe pushed against a body on the ground and from the darkness Ulv whispered, "There were only two. We can go on now."

Finding their way through the cave was a maddening torture. They had no light, nor would they dare use one if they had. There were no wheel marks to follow on the stone floor. Without Ulv's sensitive nose they would have been completely lost. The cave branched and rejoined and they soon lost all sense of direction.

Walking was almost impossible. They had to grope with their hands before them like blind men. Stumbling and falling against the rock, their fingers were soon throbbing and raw from brushing against the rough walls. Ulv followed the scent of the magter that hung in the air where they had passed. When it grew thin he knew they had left the frequently used tunnels and entered deserted ones. They could only retrace their steps and start again in a different direction.

More maddening than the walking was the way time was running out. Inexorably the glowing hands crept around the face of Brion's watch until they stood at fifteen minutes before twelve.

"There is a light ahead," Ulv whispered, and Brion almost gasped with relief. They moved slowly and silently until they stood, concealed by the darkness, looking out into a domed chamber brightly lit by glowing tubes.

"What is it?" Ulv asked, blinking in the painful wash of illumination after the long darkness.

Brion had to fight to control his voice, to stop from shouting.

"The cage with the metal webbing is a jump-space generator. The pointed, silver shapes next to it are bombs of some kind, probably the cobalt bombs. We've found it!"

His first impulse was to instantly send the radio call that would stop the waiting fleet of H-bombers. But an unconvincing message would be worse than no message at all. He had to describe exactly what he saw here so the Nyjorders would know he wasn't lying. What he told them had to fit exactly with the information they already had about the launcher and the bombs.

The launcher had been jury-rigged from a ship's jump-space generator; that was obvious. The generator and its controls were neatly cased and mounted. Cables ran from them to a roughly constructed cage of woven metal straps, hammered and bent into shape by hand. Three technicians were working on the equipment. Brion wondered what sort of blood-thirsty war-lovers the

mager had found to handle the bombing for them. Then he saw the chains around their necks and the bloody wounds on their backs.

He still found it difficult to have any pity for them. They had obviously been willing to accept money to destroy another planet—or they wouldn't have been working here. They had probably rebelled only when they had discovered how suicidal the attack would be.

Thirteen minutes to midnight.

Cradling the radio against his chest, Brion rose to his feet. He had a better view of the bombs now. There were twelve of them, alike as eggs from the same deadly clutch. Pointed like the bow of a spacer, each one swept smoothly back for its two metres of length, to a sharply chopped-off end. They were obviously incomplete, the war heads of rockets. One had its base turned towards him, and he saw six projecting studs that could be used to attach it to the missing rocket. A circular inspection port was open in the flat base of the bomb.

This was enough. With this description, the Nyjorders would know he couldn't be lying about finding the bombs. Once they realized this, they couldn't destroy Dis without first trying to neutralize them.

Brion carefully counted fifty paces before he stopped. He was far enough from the cavern so he couldn't be heard, and an angle of the cave cut off all light from behind him. With carefully controlled movements he turned on the power, switched the set to transmit, and checked the broadcast frequency. All correct. Then slowly and clearly, he described what he had seen in the cavern behind him. He kept his voice emotionless, recounting facts, leaving out anything that might be considered an opinion.

It was six minutes before midnight when he finished. He thumbed the switch to receive and waited.

There was only silence.

Slowly, the empty quality of the silence penetrated his numbed mind. There were no crackling atmospherics nor hiss of static, even when he turned the power full on. The mass of rock and earth of the mountain above was acting as a perfect grounding screen, absorbing his signal even at maximum output.

They hadn't heard him. The Nyjord fleet didn't know that the cobalt bombs had been discovered before their launching. The attack would go ahead as planned. Even now, the bomb-bay doors were opening; armed H-bombs hung above the planet, held in place only by their shackles. In a few minutes the signal would be given and the shackles would spring open, the bombs drop clear....

"Killers!" Brion shouted into the microphone. "You wouldn't listen to reason, you wouldn't listen to Hys, or me, or to any voice that suggested an alternative to complete destruction. You are going to destroy Dis, and *it's not necessary!* There were a lot of ways you could have stopped it. You didn't do any of them, and now it's too late. You'll destroy Dis, and in turn this will destroy Nyjord. Ihjel said that, and now I believe him. You're just another

damned failure in a galaxy full of failures!"

He raised the radio above his head and sent it crashing into the rock floor. Then he was running back to Ulv, trying to run away from the realization that he too had tried and failed. The people on the surface of Dis had less than two minutes left to live.

"They didn't get my message," Brion said to Ulv. "The radio won't work this far underground."

"Then the bombs will fall?" Ulv asked, looking searchingly at Brion's face in the dim reflected light from the cavern.

"Unless something happens that we know nothing about, the bombs will fall."

They said nothing after that—they simply waited. The three technicians in the cavern were also aware of the time. They were calling to each other and trying to talk to the magter. The emotionless, parasite-ridden brains of the magter saw no reason to stop work, and they attempted to beat the men back to their tasks. In spite of the blows, they didn't go; they only gaped in horror as the clock hands moved remorselessly towards twelve. Even the magter dimly felt some of the significance of the occasion. They stopped too and waited.

The hour hand touched twelve on Brion's watch, then the minute hand. The second hand closed the gap and for a tenth of a second the three hands were one. Then the second hand moved on.

Brion's immediate sensation of relief was washed away by the chilling realization that he was deep underground. Sound and seismic waves were slow, and the flare of atomic explosions couldn't be seen here. If the bombs had been dropped at twelve they wouldn't know it at once.

A distant rumble filled the air. A moment later the ground heaved under them and the lights in the cavern flickered. Fine dust drifted down from the roof above.

Ulv turned to him, but Brion looked away. He could not face the accusation in the Disan's eyes.

XVIII

One of the technicians was running and screaming. The magter knocked him down and beat him into silence. Seeing this, the other two men returned to work with shaking hands. Even if all life on the surface of the planet was dead, this would have no effect on the magter. They would go ahead as planned, without emotion or imagination enough to alter their set course.

As the technicians worked, their attitude changed from shocked numbness to anger. Right and wrong were forgotten. They had been killed—the invisible death of radiation must already be penetrating into the caves—but they also had the chance for vengeance. Swiftly they brought their work to completion, with a speed and precision they had concealed before.

"What are those offworlders doing?" Ulv asked.

Brion stirred from his lethargy of defeat and looked across the cavern floor. The men had a wheeled handtruck and were rolling one of the atomic warheads onto it. They pushed it over to the latticework of the jump-field.

"They are going to bomb Nyjord now, just as Nyjord bombed Dis. That machine will hurl the bombs in a special way to the other planet."

"Will you stop them?" Ulv asked. He had his deadly blowgun in his hand and his face was an expressionless mask.

Brion almost smiled at the irony of the situation. In spite of everything he had done to prevent it, Nyjord had dropped the bombs. And this act alone may have destroyed their own planet. Brion had it within his power now to stop the launching in the cavern. Should he? Should he save the lives of his killers? Or should he practice the ancient blood-oath that had echoed and destroyed down through the ages: *An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth*. It would be so simple. He literally had to do nothing. The score would be even, and his and the Disans' death avenged.

Did Ulv have his blowgun ready to kill Brion with, if he should try to stop the launchings? Or had he misread the Disan entirely?

"Will *you* stop them, Ulv?" he asked.

How large was mankind's sense of obligation? The caveman first had this feeling for his mate, then for his family. It grew until men fought and died for the abstract ideas of cities and nations, then for whole planets. Would the time ever come when men might realize that the obligation should be to the largest and most encompassing reality of all—mankind? And beyond that to life of all kinds.

Brion saw this idea, not in words but as a reality. When he posed the question to himself in this way he found that it stated clearly its inherent answer. He pulled his gun out, and as he did he wondered what Ulv's answer

might be.

"Nyjord is *medvirk*," Ulv said, raising his blowgun and sending a dart across the cavern. It struck one of the technicians, who gasped and fell to the floor.

Brion's shots crashed into the control board, shorting and destroying it, removing the menace to Nyjord for all time.

Medvirk, Ulv had said. A life form that cooperates and aids other life forms. It may kill in self-defense, but it is essentially not a killer or destroyer. Ulv had a lifetime of knowledge about the interdependency of life. He grasped the essence of the idea and ignored all the verbal complications and confusions. He had killed the magter, who were his own people, because they were *umedvirk*—against life. And he had saved his enemies because they were *medvirk*.

With this realization came the painful knowledge that the planet and the people that had produced this understanding were dead.

In the cavern the magter saw the destruction of their plans, and the cave mouth from which the bullets had come. Silently they rushed to kill their enemy—a concerted wave of emotionless fury.

Brion and Ulv fought back. Even the knowledge that he was doomed no matter what happened could not resign Brion to death at the hands of the magter. To Ulv, the decision was much easier. He was simply killing *umedvirk*. A believer in life, he destroyed the anti-life.

They retreated into the darkness, still firing. The magter had lights and ion rifles, and were right behind them. Knowing the caverns better than the men they chased, the pursuers circled. Brion saw lights ahead and dragged Ulv to a stop.

"They know their way through these caves, and we don't," he said. "If we try to run they'll just shoot us down. Let's find a spot we can defend and settle into it."

"Back here"—Ulv gave a tug in the right direction—"there is a cave with only one entrance, and that is very narrow."

"Let's go!"

Running as silently as they could in the darkness, they reached the deadend cavern without being seen. What noise they made was lost in other footsteps that sounded and echoed through the connecting caves. Once inside, they found cover behind a ridge and waited. The end was certain.

The magter ran swiftly into their cave, flashing his light into all the places of concealment. The beam passed over the two hidden men, and at the same instant Brion fired. The shot boomed loudly as the magter fell—a shot that would surely have been heard by the others.

Before anyone else came into the cave, Brion ran over and grabbed the still functioning light. Propping it on the rocks so it shone on the entrance, he hurried back to shelter beside Ulv. They waited for the attack.

It was not long in coming. Two magter rushed in, and died. More were

outside, Brion knew, and he wondered how long it would be before they remembered the grenades and rolled one into their shelter.

An indistinct murmur sounded outside, and sharp explosions. In their hiding place, Brion and Ulv crouched low and wondered why the attack didn't come. Then one of the magter came in the entrance, but Brion hesitated before shooting.

The man had *backed* in, firing behind him as he came.

Ulv had no compunctions about killing, only his darts couldn't penetrate the magter's thick clothing. As the magter turned, Ulv's breath pulsed once and death stung the back of the other man's hand. He collapsed into a crumpled heap.

"Don't shoot," a voice called from outside the cave, and a man stepped through the swirling dust and smoke to stand in the beam from the light.

Brion clutched wildly at Ulv's arm, dragging the blowgun from the Disan's mouth.

The man in the light wore a protective helmet, thick boots and a pouch-hung uniform.

He was a Nyjorder.

The realization was almost impossible to accept. Brion had heard the bombs fall. Yet the Nyjord soldier was here. The two facts couldn't be accepted together.

"Would you keep a hold on his arm, sir, just in case," the soldier said, glancing warily at Ulv's blowpipe. "I know what those darts can do." He pulled a microphone from one of his pockets and spoke into it.

More soldiers crowded into the cave, and Professor-Commander Krafft came in behind them. He looked strangely out of keeping in the dusty combat uniform. The gun was even more incongruous in his blue-veined hand. After giving the pistol to the nearest soldier with an air of relief, he stumbled quickly over to Brion and took his hand.

"It is a profound and sincere pleasure to meet you in person," he said. "And your friend Ulv as well."

"Would you kindly explain what is going on?" Brion said thickly. He was obsessed by the strange feeling that none of this could possibly be happening.

"We will always remember you as the man who saved us from ourselves," Krafft said, once again the professor instead of the commander.

"What Brion wants are facts, Grandpa, not speeches," Hys said. The bent form of the leader of the rebel Nyjord army pushed through the crowd of taller men until he stood next to Krafft. "Simply stated, Brion, your plan succeeded. Krafft relayed your message to me—and as soon as I heard it I turned back and met him on his ship. I'm sorry that Telt's dead—but he found what we were looking for. I couldn't ignore his report of radioactive traces. Your girl friend arrived with the hacked-up corpse at the same time I did, and we all took a long look at the green leech in its skull. Her explanation of what it is made significant sense. We were already carrying out landings when we had

your call about something having been stored in the magter tower. After that it was just a matter of following tracks—and the transmitter you planted."

"But the explosions at midnight?" Brion broke in. "I heard them!"

"You were supposed to," Hys laughed. "Not only you, but the magter in this cave. We figured they would be armed and the cave strongly defended. So at midnight we dropped a few large chemical explosive bombs at the entrance. Enough to kill the guards without bringing the roof down. We also hoped that the magter deeper in would leave their posts or retreat from the imagined radiation. And they did. It worked like a charm. We came in quietly and took them by surprise. Made a clean sweep—killed the ones we couldn't capture."

"One of the renegade jump-space technicians was still alive," Krafft said. "He told us about your stopping the bombs aimed at Nyjord, the two of you."

None of the Nyjorders there could add anything to his words, not even the cynical Hys. But Brion could empathize their feelings, the warmth of their intense relief and happiness. It was a sensation he would never forget.

"There is no more war," Brion translated for Ulv, knowing that the Disan had understood nothing of the explanation. As he said it, he realized that there was one glaring error in the story.

"You couldn't have done it," Brion said. "You landed on this planet *before* you had my message about the tower. That means you still expected the magter to be sending their bombs to Nyjord—and you made the landings in spite of this knowledge."

"Of course," Professor Krafft said, astonished at Brion's lack of understanding. "What else could we do? The magter are sick!"

Hys laughed aloud at Brion's baffled expression. "You have to understand Nyjord psychology," he said. "When it was a matter of war and killing, my planet could never agree on an intelligent course. War is so alien to our philosophy that it couldn't even be considered correctly. That's the trouble with being a vegetable eater in a galaxy of carnivores. You're easy prey for the first one that lands on your back. Any other planet would have jumped on the magter with both feet and shaken the bombs out of them. We fumbled it so long it almost got both worlds killed. Your mind-parasite drew us back from the brink."

"I don't understand," Brion said.

"A simple matter of definition. Before you came we had no way to deal with the magter here on Dis. They really were alien to us. Nothing they did made sense—and nothing we did seemed to have the slightest effect on them. But you discovered that they were *sick*, and that's something we know how to handle. We're united again; my rebel army was instantly absorbed into the rest of the Nyjord forces by mutual agreement. Doctors and nurses are on the way here now. Plans were put under way to evacuate what part of the population we could until the bombs were found. The planet is united again, and working hard."

"Because the magter are sick, infected by a destructive life form?" Brion

asked.

"Exactly so," Professor Krafft said. "We are civilized, after all. You can't expect us to fight a war—and you surely can't expect us to ignore the plight of sick neighbors?"

"No ... you surely can't," Brion said, sitting down heavily. He looked at Ulv, to whom the speech had been incomprehensible. Beyond him, Hys wore his most cynical expression as he considered the frailties of his people.

"Hys," Brion called out, "you translate all that into Disan and explain to Ulv. I wouldn't dare."

XIX

Dis was a floating golden ball, looking like a schoolroom globe in space. No clouds obscured its surface, and from this distance it seemed warm and attractive set against the cold darkness. Brion almost wished he were back there now, as he sat shivering inside the heavy coat. He wondered how long it would be before his confused body-temperature controls decided to turn off the summer adjustment. He hoped it wouldn't be as sudden or as drastic as turning it on had been.

Delicate as a dream, Lea's reflection swam in space next to the planet. She had come up quietly behind him in the spaceship's corridor, only her gentle breath and mirrored face telling him she was there. He turned quickly and took her hands in his.

"You're looking infinitely better," he said.

"Well, I should," she said, pushing back her hair in an unconscious gesture with her hand. "I've been doing nothing but lying in the ship's hospital, while you were having such a fine time this last week. Rushing around down there shooting all the magter."

"Just gassing them," he told her. "The Nyjorders can't bring themselves to kill any more, even if it does raise their own casualty rate. In fact, they are having difficulty restraining the Disans led by Ulv, who are happily killing any magter they see as being pure *umedvirk*."

"What will they do when they have all those frothing magter madmen?"

"They don't know yet," he said. "They won't really know until they see what an adult magter is like with his brain-parasite dead and gone. They're having better luck with the children. If they catch them early enough, the parasite can be destroyed before it has done too much damage."

Lea shuddered delicately and let herself lean against him. "I'm not that sturdy yet; let's sit down while we talk." There was a couch opposite the viewport where they could sit and still see Dis.

"I hate to think of a magter deprived of his symbiote," she said. "If his system can stand the shock, I imagine there will be nothing left except a brainless hulk. This is one series of experiments I don't care to witness. I rest secure in the knowledge that the Nyjorders will find the most humane solution."

"I'm sure they will," Brion said.

"Now what about us?" she said disconcertingly, leaning back in his arms. "I must say you have the highest body temperature of any one I have ever touched. It's positively exciting."

This jarred Brion even more. He didn't have her ability to put past horrors out of the mind by substituting present pleasures. "Well, just what about us?"

he said with masterful inappropriateness.

She smiled as she leaned against him. "You weren't as vague as that, the night in the hospital room. I seem to remember a few other things you said. And did. You can't claim you're completely indifferent to me, Brion Brandd. So I'm only asking you what any outspoken Anvharian girl would. Where do we go from here? Get married?"

There was a definite pleasure in holding her slight body in his arms and feeling her hair against his cheek. They both sensed it, and this awareness made his words sound that much more ugly.

"Lea—darling! You know how important you are to me—but you certainly realize that we could never get married."

Her body stiffened and she tore herself away from him.

"Why, you great, fat, egotistical slab of meat! What do you mean by that? I like you, Lea, we have plenty of fun and games together, but surely you realize that you aren't the kind of girl one takes home to mother!"

"Lea, hold on," he said. "You know better than to say a thing like that. What I said has nothing to do with how I feel towards you. But marriage means children, and you are biologist enough to know about Earth's genes—"

"Intolerant yokel!" she cried, slapping his face. He didn't move or attempt to stop her. "I expected better from you, with all your pretensions of understanding. But all you can think of are the horror stories about the worn-out genes of Earth. You're the same as every other big, strapping bigot from the frontier planets. I know how you look down on our small size, our allergies and haemophilia and all the other weaknesses that have been bred back and preserved by the race. You hate—"

"But that's not what I meant at all," he interrupted, shocked, his voice drowning hers out. "Yours are the strong genes, the viable strains—*mine* are the deadly ones. A child of mine would kill itself and you in a natural birth, if it managed to live to term. You're forgetting that you are the original homo sapiens. I'm a recent mutation."

Lea was frozen by his words. They revealed a truth she had known, but would never permit herself to consider.

"Earth is home, the planet where mankind developed," he said. "The last few thousand years you may have been breeding weaknesses back into the genetic pool. But that's nothing compared to the hundred millions of years that it took to develop man. How many newborn babies live to be a year of age on Earth?"

"Why ... almost all of them. A fraction of one per cent die each year—I can't recall exactly how many."

"Earth is home," he said again gently. "When men leave home they can adapt to different planets, but a price must be paid. A terrible price is in dead infants. The successful mutations live, the failures die. Natural selection is a brutally simple affair. When you look at me, you see a success. I have a sister—a success too. Yet my mother had six other children who died when they

were still babies. And several others that never came to term. You know about these things, don't you, Lea?"

"I know, I know ..." she said sobbing into her hands. He held her now and she didn't pull away. "I know it all as a biologist—but I am so awfully tired of being a biologist, and top of my class and a mental match for any man. When I think about you, I do it as a woman, and can't admit any of this. I need someone, Brion, and I needed you so much because I loved you." She paused and wiped her eyes. "You're going home, aren't you? Back to Anvhar. When?"

"I can't wait too long," he said, unhappily. "Aside from my personal wants, I find myself remembering that I'm a part of Anvhar. When you think of the number of people who suffered and died—or adapted—so that I could be sitting here now ... well, it's a little frightening. I suppose it doesn't make sense logically that I should feel indebted to them. But I do. Anything I do now, or in the next few years, won't be as important as getting back to Anvhar."

"And I won't be going back with you." It was a flat statement the way she said it, not a question.

"No, you won't be," he said. "There is nothing on Anvhar for you."

Lea was looking out of the port at Dis and her eyes were dry now. "Way back in my deeply buried unconscious I think I knew it would end this way," she said. "If you think your little lecture on the Origins of Man was a novelty, it wasn't. It just reminded me of a number of things my glands had convinced me to forget. In a way, I envy you your weightlifter wife-to-be, and your happy kiddies. But not very much. Very early in life I resigned myself to the fact that there was no one on Earth I would care to marry. I always had these teen-age dreams of a hero from space who would carry me off, and I guess I slipped you into the pattern without realizing it. I'm old enough now to face the fact that I like my work more than a banal marriage, and I'll probably end up a frigid and virtuous old maid, with more degrees and titles than you have shot-putting records."

As they looked through the port Dis began slowly to contract. Their ship drew away from it, heading towards Nyjord. They sat apart, without touching now. Leaving Dis meant leaving behind something they had shared. They had been strangers together there, on a strange world. For a brief time their lifelines had touched. That time was over now.

"Don't we look happy!" Hys said, shambling towards them.

"Fall dead and make me even happier then," Lea snapped bitterly.

Hys ignored the acid tone of her words and sat down on the couch next to them. Since leaving command of his rebel Nyjord army he seemed much mellowed. "Going to keep on working for the Cultural Relationships Foundation, Brion?" he asked. "You're the kind of man we need."

Brion's eyes widened as the meaning of the last words penetrated. "Are you in the C.R.F.?"

"Field agent for Nyjord," he said. "I hope you don't think those helpless office types like Faussel or Mervv really represented us there? They just took notes and acted as a front and cover for the organization. Nyjord is a fine planet, but a gentle guiding hand behind the scenes is needed, to help them find their place in the galaxy before they are pulverized."

"What's your dirty game, Hys?" Lea asked, scowling. "I've had enough hints to suspect for a long time that there was more to the C.R.F. than the sweetness-and-light part I have seen. Are you people egomaniacs, power hungry or what?"

"That's the first charge that would be leveled at us if our activities were publicly known," Hys told her. "That's why we do most of our work under cover. The best fact I can give you to counter the charge is *money*. Just where do you think we get the funds for an operation this size?" He smiled at their blank looks. "You'll see the records later so there won't be any doubt. The truth is that all our funds are donated by planets we have helped. Even a tiny percentage of a planetary income is large—add enough of them together and you have enough money to help other planets. And voluntary gratitude is a perfect test, if you stop to think about it. You can't talk people into liking what you have done. They have to be convinced. There have always been people on C.R.F. worlds who knew about our work, and agreed with it enough to see that we are kept in funds."

"Why are you telling me all this super-secret stuff," Lea asked.

"Isn't that obvious? We want you to keep on working for us. You can name whatever salary you like—as I've said, there is no shortage of ready cash."

Hys glanced quickly at them both and delivered the clinching argument. "I hope Brion will go on working with us too. He is the kind of field agent we desperately need, and it is almost impossible to find."

"Just show me where to sign," Lea said, and there was life in her voice once again.

"I wouldn't exactly call it blackmail," Brion smiled, "but I suppose if you people can juggle planetary psychologies, you must find that individuals can be pushed around like chessmen. Though you should realize that very little pushing is required this time."

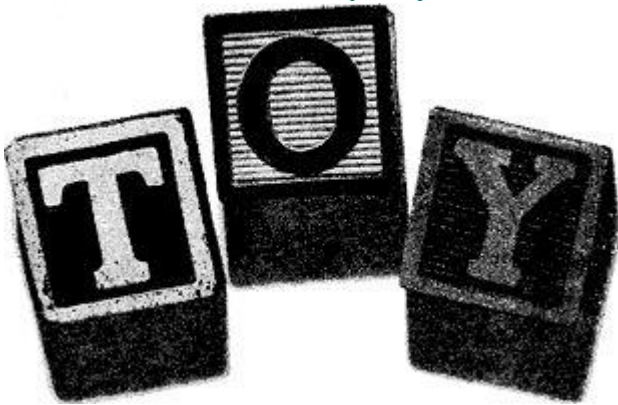
"Will you sign on?" Hys asked.

"I must go back to Anyhar," Brion said, "but there really is no pressing hurry."

"Earth," said Lea, "is overpopulated enough as it is."

THE END

Toy Shop
Illustrated by Brey



The gadget was strictly, beyond any question, a toy.

Not a real, workable device.

Except for the way it could work under a man's mental skin....



Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from *Analog* April 1962. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed. Minor spelling and typographical errors have

been corrected without note.

Because there were few adults in the crowd, and Colonel "Biff" Hawton stood over six feet tall, he could see every detail of the demonstration. The children—and most of the parents—gaped in wide-eyed wonder. Biff Hawton was too sophisticated to be awed. He stayed on because he wanted to find out what the trick was that made the gadget work.

"It's all explained right here in your instruction book," the demonstrator said, holding up a garishly printed booklet opened to a four-color diagram. "You all know how magnets pick up things and I bet you even know that the earth itself is one great big magnet—that's why compasses always point north. Well ... the Atomic Wonder Space Wave Tapper hangs onto those space waves. Invisibly all about us, and even going right through us, are the magnetic waves of the earth. The Atomic Wonder rides these waves just the way a ship rides the waves in the ocean. Now watch...."

Every eye was on him as he put the gaudy model rocketship on top of the table and stepped back. It was made of stamped metal and seemed as incapable of flying as a can of ham—which it very much resembled. Neither wings, propellers, nor jets broke through the painted surface. It rested on three rubber wheels and coming out through the bottom was a double strand of thin insulated wire. This white wire ran across the top of the black table and terminated in a control box in the demonstrator's hand. An indicator light, a switch and a knob appeared to be the only controls.

"I turn on the Power Switch, sending a surge of current to the Wave Receptors," he said. The switch clicked and the light blinked on and off with a steady pulse. Then the man began to slowly turn the knob. "A careful touch on the Wave Generator is necessary as we are dealing with the powers of the whole world here...."

A concerted *ahhhh* swept through the crowd as the Space Wave Tapper shivered a bit, then rose slowly into the air. The demonstrator stepped back and the toy rose higher and higher, bobbing gently on the invisible waves of magnetic force that supported it. Ever so slowly the power was reduced and it settled back to the table.

"Only \$17.95," the young man said, putting a large price sign on the table. "For the complete set of the Atomic Wonder, the Space Tapper control box, battery and instruction book ..."

At the appearance of the price card the crowd broke up noisily and the children rushed away towards the operating model trains. The demonstrator's words were lost in their noisy passage, and after a moment he sank into a gloomy silence. He put the control box down, yawned and sat on the edge of the table. Colonel Hawton was the only one left after the crowd had moved on.

"Could you tell me how this thing works?" the colonel asked, coming forward. The demonstrator brightened up and picked up one of the toys.

"Well, if you will look here, sir...." He opened the hinged top. "You will see

the Space Wave coils at each end of the ship." With a pencil he pointed out the odd shaped plastic forms about an inch in diameter that had been wound—apparently at random—with a few turns of copper wire. Except for these coils the interior of the model was empty. The coils were wired together and other wires ran out through the hole in the bottom of the control box. Biff Hawton turned a very quizzical eye on the gadget and upon the demonstrator who completely ignored this sign of disbelief.

"Inside the control box is the battery," the young man said, snapping it open and pointing to an ordinary flashlight battery. "The current goes through the Power Switch and Power Light to the Wave Generator ..."

"What you mean to say," Biff broke in, "is that the juice from this fifteen cent battery goes through this cheap rheostat to those meaningless coils in the model and absolutely nothing happens. Now tell me what really flies the thing. If I'm going to drop eighteen bucks for six-bits worth of tin, I want to know what I'm getting."

The demonstrator flushed. "I'm sorry, sir," he stammered. "I wasn't trying to hide anything. Like any magic trick this one can't be really demonstrated until it has been purchased." He leaned forward and whispered confidentially. "I'll tell you what I'll do though. This thing is way overpriced and hasn't been moving at all. The manager said I could let them go at three dollars if I could find any takers. If you want to buy it for that price...."

"Sold, my boy!" the colonel said, slamming three bills down on the table. "I'll give that much for it no matter *how* it works. The boys in the shop will get a kick out of it," he tapped the winged rocket on his chest. "Now *really*—what holds it up?"

The demonstrator looked around carefully, then pointed. "Strings!" he said. "Or rather a black thread. It runs from the top of the model, through a tiny loop in the ceiling, and back down to my hand—tied to this ring on my finger. When I back up—the model rises. It's as simple as that."

"All good illusions are simple," the colonel grunted, tracing the black thread with his eye. "As long as there is plenty of flimflam to distract the viewer."

"If you don't have a black table, a black cloth will do," the young man said. "And the arch of a doorway is a good site, just see that the room in back is dark."

"Wrap it up, my boy, I wasn't born yesterday. I'm an old hand at this kind of thing."

Biff Hawton sprang it at the next Thursday-night poker party. The gang were all missile men and they cheered and jeered as he hammed up the introduction.

"Let me copy the diagram, Biff, I could use some of those magnetic waves in the new bird!"

"Those flashlight batteries are cheaper than lox, this is the thing of the future!"

Only Teddy Kaner caught wise as the flight began. He was an amateur

magician and spotted the gimmick at once. He kept silent with professional courtesy, and smiled ironically as the rest of the bunch grew silent one by one. The colonel was a good showman and he had set the scene well. He almost had them believing in the Space Wave Tapper before he was through. When the model had landed and he had switched it off he couldn't stop them from crowding around the table.

"A thread!" one of the engineers shouted, almost with relief, and they all laughed along with him.

"Too bad," the head project physicist said, "I was hoping that a little Space Wave Tapping could help us out. Let me try a flight with it."

"Teddy Kaner first," Biff announced. "He spotted it while you were all watching the flashing lights, only he didn't say anything."

Kaner slipped the ring with the black thread over his finger and started to step back.

"You have to turn the switch on first," Biff said.

"I know," Kaner smiled. "But that's part of illusion—the spiel and the misdirection. I'm going to try this cold first, so I can get it moving up and down smoothly, then go through it with the whole works."



He moved his hand back smoothly, in a professional manner that drew no attention to it. The model lifted from the table—then crashed back down.

"The thread broke," Kaner said.

"You jerked it, instead of pulling smoothly," Biff said and knotted the broken thread. "Here let me show you how to do it."

The thread broke again when Biff tried it, which got a good laugh that made his collar a little warm. Someone mentioned the poker game.

This was the only time that poker was mentioned or even remembered that night. Because very soon after this they found that the thread would lift the model only when the switch was on and two and a half volts flowing through the joke coils. With the current turned off the model was too heavy to lift. The thread broke every time.

"I still think it's a screwy idea," the young man said. "One week getting fallen arches, demonstrating those toy ships for every brat within a thousand miles. Then selling the things for three bucks when they must have cost at least a hundred dollars apiece to make."

"But you *did* sell the ten of them to people who would be interested?" the older man asked.

"I think so, I caught a few Air Force officers and a colonel in missiles one day. Then there was one official I remembered from the Bureau of Standards. Luckily he didn't recognize me. Then those two professors you spotted from the university."

"Then the problem is out of our hands and into theirs. All we have to do now is sit back and wait for results."

"*What* results?! These people weren't interested when we were hammering on their doors with the proof. We've patented the coils and can prove to anyone that there is a reduction in weight around them when they are operating...."

"But a small reduction. And we don't know what is causing it. No one can be interested in a thing like that—a fractional weight decrease in a clumsy model, certainly not enough to lift the weight of the generator. No one wrapped up in massive fuel consumption, tons of lift and such is going to have time to worry about a crackpot who thinks he has found a minor slip in Newton's laws."

"You think they will now?" the young man asked, cracking his knuckles impatiently.

"I *know* they will. The tensile strength of that thread is correctly adjusted to the weight of the model. The thread will break if you try to lift the model with it. Yet you can lift the model—after a small increment of its weight has been removed by the coils. This is going to bug these men. Nobody is going to ask them to solve the problem or concern themselves with it. But it will nag at them because they know this effect can't possibly exist. They'll see at once that the magnetic-wave theory is nonsense. Or perhaps true? We don't know. But they will all be thinking about it and worrying about it. Someone is going to experiment in his basement—just as a hobby of course—to find the cause of the error. And he or someone else is going to find out what makes those coils work, or maybe a way to improve them!"

"And we have the patents...."

"Correct. They will be doing the research that will take them out of the massive-lift-propulsion business and into the field of pure space flight."

"And in doing so they will be making us rich—whenever the time comes to manufacture," the young man said cynically.

"We'll all be rich, son," the older man said, patting him on the shoulder. "Believe me, you're not going to recognize this old world ten years from now."